

Harry Potter and the Veneficus Quies

[Atlantis](#)

Chapter One: A New Friend

The car ride from King's Cross to Little Whinging got longer every year. It was a beautiful, sunny summer day and there was no greater foil for Harry Potter. Harry, unlike the average student, did not like the summer holidays. He would much rather be at school, studying spells, transfiguring buttons into beetles and playing Quidditch. No, Harry Potter was definitely not your average student and no one understood this better than his Uncle Vernon. The grumpy relative was steering his new MG down the motorway, staring directly ahead, both hands clenching the steering wheel. He seemed just as annoyed as Harry was. After sneaking a quick peek at his uncle, Harry turned back to stare out the passenger window.

The summer holidays following his fourth year did not look promising. There was no trip to the Burrow to look forward to or any Quidditch championships. Instead, he had stacks of work from his professors at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He wouldn't even have Ron to help him make up predictions for Professor Trelawney's Divination classes. Dumbledore had told Harry that he would be spending his summer with the Dursleys, especially after the events at the end of the school year.

Shuddering, Harry tried not to think about the Triwizard Tournament. The nightmarish circumstances stood out freshly in his mind. He saw Cedric's lifeless body, the shadows of his parents, and the red, snake-like eyes of Lord Voldemort.

Vernon noticed the shudder.

"What's your problem, boy?"

"Nothing," responded Harry quietly, not looking in the direction of his uncle.

Vernon grunted.

Silence filled the car again and Harry looked down at his hands, which were folded in his lap. His eyes caught site of a loose thread on the sleeve of his shirt and he began to fiddle with it. He concentrated on the thread, not allowing his mind to wander to anything else.

Vernon cleared his throat. "Your aunt and I have decided that this summer, you'll be doing some extra chores. I've had enough of your dallying about, wasting time when you could be doing useful things. And I don't want any silly ideas about you going off to see those-those, well, your kind," Vernon decreed.

"I didn't plan on it," responded Harry, his voice carrying a hint of bitterness that he hadn't intended.

“Don’t you talk back to me! I won’t have you talking like that around me or you’ll be on the street, a poor bum, just like your parents were!”

Harry longed to throttle his uncle. Wishing he could throw something or scream-- anything to get whatever had been nagging at him since the Third Task, Harry clenched his teeth and said, with the most control he could muster, “My parents were not bums. You’ve said enough about my parents and it’d probably be best if you shut up about it.”

The shock on Vernon’s face mirrored that which Harry felt. Had he really just said that? He didn’t have time to ponder as Vernon nearly drove the car into oncoming traffic. His face turned a dark aubergine colour before he stuttered senselessly. Gaining control of the vehicle, Vernon let out an animal-like roar.

“Don’t you dare speak to me like that! Who do you think you are? After all that we’ve done for you. You are a shameless ingrate. You spend your time lolling about, not doing any real work! You are worthless and if it had been up to me, I never would have let you into my house. Your aunt, for some reason or another, insisted. If it were up to me, you wouldn’t be around, taking all the handouts your aunt and I have given you...”

Harry stopped listening. As Vernon continued on his rant, turning several shades of red throughout, Harry was startled. His aunt had insisted? Vernon must be mistaken. Or, perhaps, Petunia did possess a shred of humanity. Harry realised that a part of him had always wondered why his aunt and uncle had taken in him.

He brushed aside the thought as Vernon turned the car into the drive of Number Four, Privet Drive. Vernon stopped the car and got out, not even bothering to help Harry with his school things. He merely popped the boot and went inside. Harry walked to the rear of the car, pondering how he was going to get his heavy things out of the car, into the house and finally up the stairs.

The more spiteful part of him longed to open his trunk right there in the drive and take everything out and carry it in armfuls to the house. He could imagine the looks on the Dursleys’ faces as he carried load after load of robes and quills and parchments. His broomstick alone could very well send Petunia into hysterics. However, he resisted, deciding that the punishment wouldn’t be worth the fifteen or twenty minutes of half-hearted amusement. Gathering his strength, Harry heaved his trunk for the car, wincing only slightly as it smacked against the bumper. He dragged it into the house and pulled it up the stairs, being sure to create at least some noise as he went.

He passed Dudley's room, where his cousin was sitting at the computer. Walking into his room, Harry stopped dead. Everything that had once been in there was gone. The room was stripped bare; there were no books or broken toys. All that remained was the bed, the desk (presumably empty) and a bedside table. The lamp had no shade, just a bare bulb and the only sign of life in the room was the alarm clock, which was blinking 12:17. Checking his watch, Harry saw that it was nearly five o'clock and set about changing the clock, which was not an easy task. The minute button kept sticking and once the time was set, the clock did not stop blinking. Resigned to a very miserable holiday, Harry began to unpack his trunk.

Harry looked woefully at his stack of books. He checked the lists of assignments. The three-foot parchment about various truth potions that Snape has assigned looked downright deadly and his transfiguration work didn't look like fun and games either. Harry was settling in to begin his first transfiguration assignment when his aunt screeched from the bottom of the stairs that it was time for tea. Trudging down the stairs, Harry began to think of reasons why his room could be as bare as it was. His question was answered as he sat at the table.

"I've made a list of chores for you. Your room has been emptied so that you will not have anything to distract you," stated his aunt as she dished out potatoes for Dudley before handing the bowl to Vernon. Harry bit back an annoyed response and settled on rolling his head towards the ceiling. After all, there's nothing like a bunch of broken, useless toys to provide distraction.

"I expect you to begin work on the garden after dinner. This summer, I have joined a gardening club and I want the beds weeded and freshly mulched before you begin planting. Tomorrow, I expect the garden to be worked on, the grass mowed, and the car washed. In the evenings, I want you to help my Duddykins with his school assignments," his aunt continued, handing him the bowl she was passing around.

"But Aunt Petunia! What about my school assignments?" asked Harry, forgetting to wonder why he would be doing all the work in the garden; he hadn't joined the garden club. His annoyance increased threefold as he went to scoop potatoes onto his plate and instead found the bowl empty. He clanked the spoon into the bowl and set it in the centre of the table with a thud.

"Boy, I don't care about your bloody school assignments! It's just as well if you failed out of that- that- school of yours! Then you could get an honest job and start to pay for some of your living expenses!" Vernon roared suddenly, catching Harry off-guard.

Harry tried to squelch the anger bursting inside him. Failing miserably, he began to see red as the vase of flowers on the table shattered. Dudley ducked under the table as Vernon bellowed. He grabbed Harry by the collar of his shirt and pulled him across the glass shard-covered table. Harry tried to wrench himself from his uncle's grasp and as he squirmed, he noticed the shock written all over Vernon's face, which was followed quickly by total dismay. Vernon let go of Harry's shirt at the exact moment that Harry realised he was no longer splayed across the table. He was in fact, levitating just above Dudley's no longer hidden head. He caught the look on Petunia's face, just before she screamed. Harry fell to the table, jumped down and ran to his room; his footsteps thundered up the stairs and causing all of the framed Dudley pictures to shake and rattle.

In his room, Harry collapsed on the bed in shock. It had been nearly two years since he had lost control like that. With a bemused smile, remembered the last time he'd been that angry. Aunt Marge floating in the kitchen. He almost laughed before the look on Petunia's face slammed back into his memory. Picturing her horsey face, he realised with a shock what that look had been. Before she shrieked, had his aunt been smiling?

The afternoon sun burned cruelly on Harry's back as he worked. His aunt Petunia watched from the air-conditioned kitchen as Harry slaved away in the backyard. Of course, the first day of holidays had to be odd weather. No rain today or cool air. Instead, there had to be the hot sun and no breeze. Of course, the day had been dull and unending. After Uncle Vernon had finished screaming at him about the scene at dinner the night before, ("Once more and you are out of my house!"), Petunia had shoved him into the garden, handing him a small bin to collect weeds. After finishing the garden, he went in for tea. The appetizing meal consisted of a slice of stale bread and a glass of lukewarm water from the tap. He had decided against boiling it to make his afternoon tea, being somewhat cautious of his aunt's wrath.

Once he was outside again, attempting to mow the lawn with his uncle's old, partially broken lawnmower, Harry heard the flapping of wings and looked up to see two owls approaching. The first owl dropped a letter with emerald writing, addressed to Harry and the second letter was not marked. Harry opened the letter with the emerald writing.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus

Dear Mr. Potter,

In light of the current situation facing the wizarding world, Hogwarts will begin a training module in the fall for ten of the best and brightest students in the school. This program will involve intensive study in your usual course studies, as well as extracurricular subjects. In order to justly select the students enrolled, all pupils from fourth year and up will be administered an exam at some point during the summer holidays. The exam will arrive via owl post and should be completed in the mandated time limit. If you are selected for this program, you will receive further information. In order to properly prepare for you exams, it is recommended that you review the past summaries of studies at school. These shall prove to be immensely useful. Good luck.

Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress, Hogwarts School

School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Harry pondered the letter once more. It seemed unlikely that he would get into the program, but he was able to think of several others that would be accepted. Then realising that he was still clutching the second letter, Harry opened it, not surprised by the sender.

Harry,

Have you received the letter about the new program yet? I'm thrilled about the exam. Can you imagine working on different topics than our usual courses? It will be terribly exciting. However, there is the small matter of the acceptance exam. I've compiled a list of books that should help. Do you expect that the Dursleys will allow you to meet Ron and me in London for a bit of revising? Send your reply with Hedwig!

With love,

Hermione

He smiled as he reread her letter. While everyone else was most likely grimacing at the idea of an exam over the holidays, Hermione was actually excited at the thought of a dreadfully difficult exam. Harry's thoughts drifted to Hermione's kiss on Platform 9¾. Absentmindedly, his fingers reached up to touch his face where she had kissed him. What had that meant? Never before had Hermione shown such an outward display of affection. Harry smiled to himself and shut off the lawnmower. Just as Harry was walking inside, Uncle Vernon came striding into the kitchen with a smirk on his face. He thumped Dudley on the shoulder and shot Harry an icy glare, all the while beaming at his son. As soon as Vernon's glare was off of him, he made a face at his wide back.

"How would you fancy a holiday this summer, Dudders?"

"Holiday?" Dudley answered stupidly.

"Grunnings is offering a retreat this summer for its employees. It's especially for fathers and their sons. I thought we could take the retreat and then visit your Aunt Marge for a bit before you returned for fall term at Smeltings." Dudley grinned excitedly as Petunia strode into the kitchen, looking like she had something foul-smelling under her nose. As Vernon relayed his plans to her, Petunia could not disguise the look of abject terror on her face. "I will not spend the summer holidays alone with that!" she screeched, gesturing wildly at Harry. "But Petunia, we already agreed to this. It will only be for about a month. Dudley and I need the male bonding time!" Vernon said, looking at her rather pointedly.

"How will Dudley finish his assignments before school starts?" she asked, trying a different method of deliberation. "The boy can help him finish before we leave," replied Vernon, once again assuming a tone that implied that Harry was not in the room, or for that matter, even in existence.

As the argument continued, Harry felt torn. On one hand, the idea of Dudley and Vernon being gone most of the summer was tempting, but on the other, the idea of spending the summer with Petunia was terrifying. Also was the added negative of having to spend even more time with his stupid, whale-like cousin than was absolutely necessary before he and Vernon left. As he mentally debated his stand on the issue, his aunt and uncle's argument came to an end.

"Petunia! Enough! It is time you let Dudley go! We will be perfectly fine and it will do him some good. I will not have you holding back my son from such freedom!"

Aunt Petunia blanched and resigned herself to giving smouldering glares to Uncle Vernon's back as he sat with Dudley discussing the plans for their trip. The departure date was July 30th and Harry grinned at the small, accidental birthday present.

"You, boy! What are you smiling about?"

"Nothing, Uncle Vernon."

"I don't want to hear about you doing anything to embarrass your aunt!"

Seizing the opportunity to get something he wanted, Harry replied, "Uncle Vernon, can I go to London?"

"Why would I pay for you to go to bloody London?" His uncle looked confused now, most likely wondering where Harry would ever come up with a trip such as the one he was suggesting.

"Well, we're allowed to use magic to study for these upcoming entrance exams. And I know how much you hate me using *magic*. I wouldn't want to embarrass Aunt Petunia." Harry emphasized had emphasised the word 'magic' and waited patiently for Vernon's response.

Vernon sputtered at the dreaded 'm-word', much to Harry's satisfaction.

"And you expect me to pay for this blasted trip?"

"Of course not."

"Alright, but if you use any, of, *that* in my house..."

Harry grinned and before Uncle Vernon could finish his sentence, Harry dashed up the stairs to write Hermione and Ron.

Harry laid down the book that he had been reading for his holiday assignments. He slid his glasses onto his forehead and lightly pinched the bridge of his nose as he closed his eyes. The upcoming fifth year in History of Magic was expected to be more exciting than previous years. There would be no more Goblin rebellions. The students would begin their studies of modern magical history and there were new books and less boring assignments for the class. Harry closed his eyes at the thought of school. It was his first week of the summer holidays and already he was contemplating the upcoming school year. There would be loads of class work in preparations for the OWLs. Everything would be much more difficult and Harry found this new plethora of difficult tasks was daunting, yet somewhat comforting at the same time.

Anything that would keep his mind off of the Triwizard Tournament was good for Harry. He allowed himself a brief lapse into the memory and almost immediately, a wave of those screams washed over him. He had hit the grass in the pitch and the panicked screams of the crowd had hit him immediately. His heart clenched at the

memory. The duel with Voldemort had been terrible and strange. The images of his parents' ghost-like figures floated in his mind, one of the many things that haunted his nightmares. He heard his mother's voice. He felt the pain of the Cruciatus Curse that Voldemort had inflicted upon him. He imagined once more the feeling of the blood trailing slowly down his right arm from the crook of his elbow and he looked down at it now. It was a bright pink colour. Madame Pomfrey had healed it as best she could, but had told her that nothing would take away that remaining scar.

Another scar.

He mentally chastised himself. A scar? A scar was nothing compared to what Cedric had. Or didn't, as it was. Most vividly of the night-of the all the vile things that evening in the graveyard-Harry remembered the weight of Cedric's lifeless body. He remembered the struggle, to pull Cedric...to reach the Cup...

A sob caught in Harry's throat. No matter how much he would fight Voldemort. No matter whether or not Harry was a formidable opponent. No matter how much Harry struggled for his life time and again. No matter what happened, the idea of death lingered with Harry. He had always lived with the death of his parents, but aside from that, Harry did not know of true death. In all of his fighting and power enhancing, there was nothing that Harry could do that would cheat death. It had been too late for Cedric. Harry had made up his mind as he'd brought the body back to Hogwarts. Never again. Never again would Voldemort lord his power of Harry. Harry would fight until one of them was dead. Really dead. A shadow of Voldemort's former existence would not be enough. An all-consuming feeling of blind hatred flooded over him. He was enraged.

Harry closed his eyes tighter, feeling the tears slide down his cheeks. Inside, Harry silently begged for some sort of mercy. A reprieve for this guilt and horror and anger. Harry knew that he was falling apart inside. He needed someone that could support him and would love him unconditionally as a friend. He needed someone to hold him and tell him that it would all be okay.

As if on cue, Hedwig flew silently in through Harry's window. She landed next to him on the bed, her amber eyes reflecting great concern for him. He untied the small parchment on Hedwig's leg and handed her an owl treat. She fluttered to her perch and Harry broke the seal on the parchment.

Harry,

I hope you don't mind me writing this letter to you. I know it's late and I hope that I haven't woken you up. I just wanted to tell you that I'm worried about you. I hope you're not blaming yourself for this mess. It's not your fault and don't for one second believe that it is. I wanted to let you know that if you ever needed someone to confide in, I'll be here for you. Just owl me anytime, day or night, and I'll do my best to be there for you. Best wishes, Harry.

Your friend,

Ginny

Harry smiled. Ginny would be a good friend. Ever since second year, they'd shared the unusual bond of a terrifying experience. It had brought him the friendship of Hermione and Ron and he hoped to increase his friendship with Ginny. She was a smart witch and had a quick wit. They hadn't talked much since the Chamber of Secrets second year, but he made it a point to acknowledge her in the hallways and to occasionally chat with her. He was grateful for this extension of friendship from the girl, knowing that she had a good heart and that was propelling her to do this more than anything else.

Sighing, Harry reached for the book he'd laid down. The book slipped from his grasp and clattered to the floor. It was half past one in the morning and Harry waited for some sort of reprimand from Vernon. There was only silence, mingled with a light snoring from someone in the Dursley household. He picked up the book and it fell open in his lap. The book had opened to the Arts section. A moving wizard's photograph on the page showed a bright young actress at an award's ceremony. The small caption cited the actress as Amarante Zinia. She was tall and thin with flowing red hair. Her eyes were a cornflower blue. She waved and smiled cheekily at him. Occasionally, she would wink.

The story of the vibrant young actress saddened Harry. According to the article, she had been brilliant. She was revered throughout the wizarding world for her part in a wizard play company. Everyone adored her. However, about sixth months before the fall of Voldemort, she had disappeared without a trace. No one had ever heard from her since her disappearance. Harry saddened as he read her story. She had been second in her class at Beauxbatons, only in her early twenties at her disappearance. The brief summary, oddly enough, told nothing of the young witch's family. Another victim of Voldemort. How many others had there been?

There was something about the picture that kept grabbing Harry's attention. The eyes were so familiar. They captivated the reader, demanding only the most rapt of attentions. He stared and stared at the picture until he noticed that the eyes were gone. The actress now lay curled in her cloak on the stage where she had earlier received her award. Harry softly closed the book. He shut off the lights. A brief battle raged in his mind. His tired and aching body begged him not to leave the bed, but he did not want to risk another loud bang from the book hitting the floor. Harry wished he had his wand so that he could levitate the book to the desk. Of course, he knew that was out of the question. Underage wizardry was frowned upon. And that was putting it lightly.

Suddenly, Harry felt as a great weight had been lifted. He opened his eyes and indeed, one had. His book floated a few inches above where it had lain on his cover. It shook a bit, teetering on an invisible balance. Feeling stupid, but curious, Harry waved his hand in the general direction of the book. Suddenly, it sped forward, moving towards the desk at lightning speed. Harry winced, expecting the book to smash into the opposite wall. No crash came and he peeked an eye open, looking suspiciously towards the book, which was lying neatly on his desk. His exhaustion forgotten, Harry stood slowly and moved stealthily towards the desk, dreading what would happen if he awoke the Dursleys. He stared hard at the book and waved his hand cautiously this time. Yet there it remained, unmoving. He waved his hand a second time. Again, nothing. He felt like an idiot. However, before he could even begin to ponder the

reasoning behind this, Harry's mind and body fought viciously for sleep once again. He allowed his rubbery legs to carry him to his bed, where he collapsed, letting the sleepiness envelop him and carry him off into dreamless slumber.

The Dursley house was chaotic. Vernon and Dudley were running rabid through it, attempting to pack for their retreat. Dudley was currently throwing a temper tantrum because Vernon had told him that he would not need his racing bike for the trip. Harry was also packing for his trip to London, albeit with much less of a scene.

As he was placing a robe into his bag, a great eagle owl flew into the room. Untying the letter, Harry handed the great bird an Owl treat and it took off through his bedroom window.

Harry,

I have been informed of your upcoming trip to London. Seeing as you will be in Diagon Alley, you should be safe. However, we will be keeping an eye on you and if something should happen, I have enclosed a portkey that will take you directly to Hogwarts. Be careful and on the lookout for trouble.

Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster, Hogwarts

Harry opened the small box with the portkey inside. He chuckled at one of Hermione's SPEW badges, resting on some soft fabric tucked into the box. He shook his head and tossed it into the bag that contained a few pieces of wizarding gold. Mentally, he listed the objects required on this trip before loading them into his pack. A few of the schoolbooks recommended in a letter from Hermione, parchment, quills, two sets of robes, and some owl treats. Deciding he was set for the short trip, he hoisted the bag onto his shoulder, grunting at the weight. As he marched down the stairs, he silently hoped it wouldn't be a long weekend.

Chapter Two: The Witch

Harry stood next to his aunt in the front hall. Vernon and Dudley were loading their bulging suitcases in the boot of a taxi. Vernon nodded to Petunia and scowled at Harry. Once inside the car, Dudley smashed his face against the window, looking at Harry. Acting all of his 14 years, Harry stuck his tongue out, only to be reprimanded by Petunia.

“You leave your cousin alone! So, just how do you suppose you’ll be getting to London?” she sneered.

“Not sure. Hermione said that they’d be here to pick me up at one o’clock.”

“Well, it’s a quarter to now,” Petunia responded rather snidely.

“Then I suppose I could catch up on some reading for my Care of Magical Creatures course.”

“Care of...Ma-ma...What did your uncle tell you about using that word in this house?!”

Harry just looked at her, a light of defiance shading his green eyes.

“Something about you has changed. And I most certainly do not like this new attitude of yours. I think something happened to you at that school of yours, but whatever it was does not give you any sort of excuse to behave the way you do.”

Her words were met with a blank stare. “You wouldn’t be able to understand what happened to me at Hogwarts, Aunt Petunia. It would give you nightmares.”

Petunia looked at him for a moment, her eyes wide. Just as quickly as the startled look had come did it change into an angry glare. Her eyes were now widened in anger and with a huff she hurried from the hall. Harry stared after her a moment before looking out the sidelight. As he did so, a long black car rolled up in the front. Before the car completely stopped, a door flew open and Hermione leapt from the car.

“Is that how you’re planning on leaving?” Petunia asked, sticking her head out from the kitchen.

“Yes. Why?”

“Well, it’s a rather large car.”

“Yes, well...” Harry said quietly, ignoring his aunt and leaving her curiosity unquenched.

Petunia ogled at the car as Harry rushed to meet Hermione.

“Hermione! A ministry car?”

“Mr Weasley asked for us to be able to use it so that our trip was a little more guarded. Dumbledore is trying to keep an eye on us as much as possible. I know he doesn’t like the idea of this trip, but when I wrote to him, I suggested that it may do you well to get away from the Dursleys and I know Mrs Weasley wrote him the same.”

Harry grinned and took up his bag. He opened the back door and climbed into the back of the magically enlarged car. There were a handful of squishy armchairs and a small juice bar. The wizard wireless was blaring in the corner and Ron was raiding a small refrigerator for butterbeer.

Ginny smiled widely at him as he and Hermione sat down in two of the armchairs. She was seated across from them with a book in her lap.

“So Harry, what do you think the exams will be like?” asked Ginny.

“I haven’t got a clue. Any ideas Hermione?”

“I doubt it will be a written exam. Perhaps we’ll all be sent some sort of portkey to go to an examination centre.”

“Maybe, why won’t it be—”

“Hey! There’s no butterbeer in here!” cried Ron, interrupting Harry.

“Surely there’s some pumpkin juice in there?” Ginny asked, not looking up from the book in her lap.

“Of course. Oooh, gillywater.” Ron pulled out a clear bottle that held a slightly greenish liquid. “Anyone want some?”

Harry just shrugged and took one of the bottles offered by Ron. He noticed that despite her objections, Hermione still took one of the bottles.

“Do you think we’ll get in trouble? I mean, I doubt this was meant for us.”

“It’ll be alright Herm, I promise,” Ron flashed a huge grin at Hermione, accompanied by a small wink. Harry noticed this and glanced questioningly at Ginny. She shrugged and looked at Hermione blushing, all the while with a knowing smirk on her face. Harry shrugged it off and took a sip of gillywater.

The odd tasting drink tickled his throat and he gagged a bit. However, almost immediately after he’d swallowed the strangely coloured substance, a sweet and pleasant taste invaded his mouth. He took another sip of the drink and again, experienced that same aftertaste.

It was obvious that the others had noticed the same taste and they were eagerly drinking it.

A few bottles later, Hermione had become rather giggly. She was attempting to read a book and failing miserably (much to her dismay, it was upside down and she was not sure what to do) while Ron played with one of her shoelaces. He was currently sitting upside down in a chair next to Hermione. Ginny, completely silent, looked slightly flushed while Harry had felt none of the affects of the mild drink.

“Ron! Leave me be! I’m, hic, trying to read!” shrieked Hermione.

Giggling, Ron pulled himself off the floor and snatched Hermione’s book.

“Watcha reading?” he tittered, glancing at the book. “Ooh, Her-my-oh-nee, you’re reading a very naughty book. *Ronan clutched Rhonda to his rippled chest. He pulled her face to his and kissed her full, red lips passionately, as if he drew his life from those very lips. Grasping her, he picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder. ‘Oh Ronan!’ she cried breathily. As her lay her on the bed, she ripped the shirt from his muscled torso, reaching for his-*“

“Give me that!” Hermione cried. Ron fell into a fit of giggles and tripped over his own feet, landing on the floor. Ginny and Harry watched on, amused. Hermione leapt from her chair onto the incapacitated Ron. Surprisingly, she grasped him in a weak headlock and began to ruffle his hair. He cried out and grabbed at her arms. He freed himself and pulled a fake glare at her. She tackled him again and he dodged her, quickly running to hide behind Harry’s chair.

Harry looked at his friend hiding and watched Hermione standing a few feet away, a challenging look in her eyes. He was somewhat surprised by their odd behaviour but he shrugged it off, looking towards the four or five bottles collecting around the seats they had previously occupied.

Just as Ron began to peek out again, the car lurched as it came to a stop. Ron pitched forward and landed near Hermione, who was sprawled across the floor. Harry looked at Ginny who was also shaking her head. She nodded at him and Harry picked up their belongings and pulled Ron to his feet. Ginny helped Hermione stand and together they exited the vehicle, Hermione blinking into the unusually bright sunlight. Ron tripped several times as he walked from the car to the entrance of the Leaky Cauldron.

Harry looked towards Ginny and Hermione. Hermione was being supported by Ginny and she was giggling as Ginny helped her along. His heart skipped a little as he looked at the two girls. Ginny seemed to be a new person. Or maybe she wasn’t-- perhaps, he was just noticing her for the first time. As Ginny turned her head to look at him, her long hair caught the sun at just the right angle, causing it to shimmer almost magically. She grinned at him and he smiled, wondering about this girl that he had shrugged off as his friend’s little sister for the past four years. The letter she had written to him still stuck out in his mind, the gesture somewhat out of the blue. Perhaps it was just her way of showing that she had grown up a great deal and had shed her young awkwardness. She hadn’t blushed nearly as much in the past hour or

so as she had the few previous exchanges they had shared. He shrugged his thoughts off and continued to walk into the wizarding pub.

When they had reached the rooms they were staying in, they found a small suite. A large sitting room flanked by two bedrooms completed their quarters. Harry hauled Ron off to the right, while Ginny pulled Hermione to the left.

“Harry, do you like Hermione?” asked Ron, once they were inside their room.

“Sure, she’s one of my best friends.”

“No, I mean, like, her.”

“Um, no, I don’t think I do. Why?” Harry asked as he pushed Ron towards one of the beds and began putting away their belongings.

“Ok, good. ‘Cause I think I do.”

“I know. But what about Krum?”

“How do you know? And what about Krum?”

“Well, shouldn’t she be going to Bulgaria this summer to see him?”

“She decided not to go. I think everything that-well, you know. I think she just figured it was best to stay in England. I’m sure Dumbledore agreed.”

Harry nodded to his best friend and opened his mouth to ask about whether or not Ron had told Hermione, but Ron cut him off.

“And what do you mean you know?”

“Well...we all knew. It was obvious. What, with the glaring and the whole scene about the Yule Ball.”

“Does she like me mate?”

“She might.”

“Really?” Ron smiled as he drifted off into sleep.

Harry looked at his best friend for a few moments, torn between smirking at the already tangled sheets and the wild red hair sticking out in every direction and shaking his head at the entire Ron and Hermione situation.

Harry walked from their room into the main sitting to find Ginny exiting the room she was sharing with Hermione.

“Do you want to go to Fortescue’s?” he asked her, suddenly itching to get to Diagon Alley.

“Sounds good to me.” Ginny picked up a piece of parchment from the desk and scribbled a note to Hermione and Ron. Picking up her light cloak, she led Harry out of their rooms and down to the courtyard.

Tapping the brick, Ginny turned to Harry, “Does Ron like Hermione?”

“Er... I’m not sure if I can answer that. He may be angry if I tell.”

Ginny gave him a measuring glance before giggling, “I think those two have some talking to do. Hermione has liked Ron since before the Yule Ball.”

“Drama. Always with those two. Drama.

Ginny nodded, giggling again. “I couldn’t believe them this afternoon!”

“What happened with the gillywater anyway? It didn’t effect me any and you didn’t seem to be suffering horribly,” Harry asked.

“I’m not sure. I know that Ron ate a lot at breakfast today. Maybe it was all in their heads.”

“I can’t believe that Hermione was reading that book! I didn’t know she read trash like that!” Harry exclaimed.

“Oh, those books aren’t trash. They’re just much, er, lighter reading than what she usually reads.”

“Do you read books like that?”

“What if I do?”

“Just curious. Do most girls read those?”

“I think so,” replied Ginny, blushing slightly.

“Ah. Er...So what exactly are we going to be looking for at the library? The letters didn’t mention what the exams were going to be on.”

“Well, Hermione and I figure that they will just test us on subjects at school, you know, to check our adequacy. I doubt we’ll be tested on much that we wouldn’t know.”

“Are the exams based on year?”

“I’m not positive, but I doubt it. That wouldn’t be fair. I suppose that if one was a fourth year and had enough competence, than it wouldn’t be much different from a sixth year with the same amount. We’ll all be revising the same things, so I don’t see why the exams would be different. I suppose that if you just can’t do it, well, then you can’t do it.”

Harry nodded. They had reached Fortescue's. They walked through the doors and up to the main counter. Ginny ordered a Knickerbocker Glory and Harry ordered a strawberry and peanut butter sundae. Taking their orders to the tables in the front, Harry turned to Ginny.

"Gin, I wanted to thank you for your letter. It was completely unexpected, but it meant a lot."

Ginny blushed. "You're welcome. Ron said you were pretty cut up and I'll never forget what you did my first year."

Harry smiled at her slightly and she blushed again. "I won't either."

"Do you think they'll actually tell each other?" Ginny asked, ending their very private moment.

"I sincerely doubt that."

"Maybe we should help them along," Ginny grinned devilishly.

"What do you have in mind?"

Ginny moved her head and Harry leaned in closer as she whispered the plan to him.

"Hey, what are you two doing snuggled so close together?" demanded Hermione, looking at them with a smile on her face, but an unidentifiable look in her eyes.

"We were discussing dinner plans for tonight," said Ginny, smiling at Harry over her ice cream.

"What about dinner plans?" asked Ron, catching up to Hermione. He was rubbing at his temples.

"Are you two feeling better?" Ginny asked, blatantly ignoring Ron.

"Yeah. Hermione used some sort of spell on me. I can think clearly, but I have a headache now. What happened anyways?"

"Apparently, you two just can't hold your drink," Harry responded, hiding a smirk.

"Well. Shall we move onto the library? I have a list of books that should be helpful," Hermione said, avoiding Harry's bemused look.

Hermione led the way to the Diagon Alley Library. Harry and Ron had never been to this library, let alone noticed it. It did not, however, surprise them that Hermione knew of it.

Once inside, Hermione handed them each a list of books. Harry looked his over.

Practice Exams for the Last Minute Wizard by Morgan Prue
Review of Spells and Hexes by Sarisha Nani
A Capsule-sized Study of the Dark Arts by Blake Kern
So You Have to Pass Transfiguration (Tomorrow)? By Rhonda Geary
A Beginner's Guide to Charms by Mariah Jinx
Potions for Dummies by Severus Snape
Dr. Foggy's Guide to Divining the Future by Dr. Ramla Foggy
Arithmancy by Portia Pallas

Harry read the list again. Severus Snape? Writing a book? Harry shook his head, unable to imagine Snape being able to do anything than brew potions or make snide remarks. *Only Hermione would get this list together*, he thought as he began to head towards the stacks. He decided that the first book in his search would be the book by Snape.

He'd located the book and as he reached for it, eyeing two of the other books he'd picked up on the way, his hand collided with something. Standing directly in front of him was Ginny. He looked at her and smiled. She returned a smile that reached her eyes and laughed, the reason for which was lost on him. As he looked at her, his eyes moved down the length of her, starting first with her vibrant hair. He moved down, tracing the lines of her face, which had changed over her third year in school. He noticed the curve of her neck and...

Harry shook himself.

Ron's sister, mate. She's Ron's sister.

"I suppose it doesn't really matter which of us takes the book, since we'll all be studying it, right?"

He blinked, her words taking ages to meet his ears. "What?"

"The book."

"Oh, yeah. I guess you're right."

"Shall I take it then?"

He nodded and handed the book to her, their hands brushing. He stopped, wondering what exactly was going on. This girl, whom he'd hardly talked to in the three or so years he'd known her was suddenly very interesting. She had grown up some and her shyness was now charming, rather than bothersome. Her liquid brown eyes captured him and he felt at a loss for explanation.

He noticed that she was staring at him, something vaguely recognisable in her eyes, yet at the same time, very foreign to him. It was suddenly becoming very warm in the room. He shook his head slightly as he looked at the red-headed girl standing in front of him. Her smile had fallen away and she was wetting her lips. He looked at her lips, knowing exactly what he wanted to do and wondering where the feeling had come from. Before he knew what was happening, he was leaning towards her...

Thud!

He jumped away from her, startled. She looked first at him, then down at the offending volume lying open on the wooden floor. She looked back at him and shook herself.

"Gods, Harry, I'm so..."

"No, no... it's entirely my fault. I'm sorry Ginny."

"It's ok, don't worry about it," Ginny said, flustered. She reddened further and took a step away from him. She picked the book up from the floor, nodded her thanks and skulked away. Harry sighed. He grabbed the books he'd been after and retreated to the table where Ron was sitting with a stack of books.

"All right Harry?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes, yes, quite alright."

Ron shrugged and went back to "So You Have to Pass Transfiguration (Tomorrow)?" and Harry leafed through the potions book.

After several hours of exhausting revision, the four students retreated to their rooms at the Leaky Cauldron. As they all collapsed into comfortable armchairs, Hermione piped up, "Didn't you mention something about dinner plans earlier?"

"Ah, yes, well, um, Ginny and I were thinking of going out to eat tonight so that we could get to know each other a little better. We were wondering if you and Ron might like to come with us."

"Like on a date?" asked Ron.

Ginny and Harry, forgetting their earlier plans, looked at him in absolute horror.

"No!"

"Of course not!"

"A date!"

"Why would it be a date?"

"Alright, alright, so its not a date. What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing...nothing's wrong. Why would it be a date? We hardly know each other!" Ginny said, her voice going an octave above it's normal tone.

Harry and Ginny quickly regained their composure, all the while receiving odd looks from Hermione and Ron. The girls stood up and walked to their room. Ron and Harry sat looking at each other, both nervous. Ron stood first, heading into the bathroom. Harry heard the shower and went into the bedroom to get ready.

After Harry had finished showering and dressing, he was sitting on the bed, watching Ron fiddle with a clasp on his robe. He caught Ron's eye.

"Do you like Ginny?" said Ron.

"Does Ginny like me?" asked Harry.

They stared at each other for a brief moment, having asked their questions at the same time. Harry let out a nervous laugh.

"Do you like her Harry?" Ron asked, his voice quiet.

"I-well, honestly, I'm not sure. I feel like I barely know her."

"Barely know her? You've known her for over three years."

"Well, no. I've known you for four years now, and I've known of Ginny that long, but I didn't talk to her until second year and even now, I only say a few words to her whenever I see her."

Ron nodded. "I think she likes you. She probably has for years."

"Well, I'd like to get to know her better."

Again, Ron nodded. "Right, but let's say that you do get to know her better and do decide you like her. If you hurt her, I'll kill you."

"I know, Ron. I know."

"And what's going on with you and Hermione?"

"Nothing."

"Do you want something?"

Ron just looked at him before peering at the clock over the mantle. "It's time to go, mate."

Harry shook his head, but before he could get another word in edgewise, Hermione and Ginny walked into the room. Neither was dressed up especially nice, but they were both freshly showered and clean of the dust from the library. Hermione had tamed her hair and pulled it back into a ponytail. Ginny's hair was free and flowing down her shoulders. They were dressed in robes, Ginny's an emerald green and Hermione's a dark blue. Harry and Ron were dressed simply in black.

The boys led the way from the room. Once downstairs, Tom, the owner of the Leaky Cauldron seated them in a private dining room. After placing menus on their plates, he left them.

"So, Gin, did you find anything interesting in that spell book?" Harry questioned.

"Not really. It just made lots of suggestions over what most basic examinations would be like. Like I said earlier, the test will most likely cover material we should know from the first three years. What do you think Herm?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not all that worried about it. Whatever we read through today should be enough."

"What about Divination?" asked Ginny.

Hermione's annoyance was visible in her facial expression. Despite her hate of the imprecise magic, Hermione had spent a good portion of the afternoon reading about it, just in case it was on the exam. As she was one of the few students in the school not studying Divination, her reasoning was likely correct and there would be testing on that particular subject. Hermione and Ginny continued their conversation about school related topics and Harry asked Ron about the Chudley Cannons, his favourite Quidditch team.

Tom came back a few minutes later for their drink orders.

"I'll just have pumpkin juice, thanks."

"Same here," added Hermione.

"What? No gillywater?" Harry asked Hermione.

Hermione tossed a pumpkin roll at him from the basket on the table as Ginny joined in Harry's laughter. Their drinks arrived and they placed their orders, all four students beginning to get very hungry.

The food tasted delicious. Their drinks kept refilling themselves and their meal was plentiful. The warmth of the room and conversation comforted Harry. He loved being with his friends. He grinned inwardly at the fun he was having this summer. During the meal, he'd sneak a peak at Ginny, who would occasionally catch his gaze and smile, a slight blush creeping up her cheeks.

When they'd finished the last of the various puddings, Ron stood.

"I think I'd like to take a walk. Would anyone like to join me?"

"I'll join you," Hermione answered, nearly a whisper.

They stood and Hermione linked her arm through Ron's as he walked her out of the dining room. Ginny grinned at Harry.

“Well, that was much easier than I thought.”

“I should say so!” Harry laughed. Seriously, he added, “Ginny, about earlier at the library, I’m-

“No! Don’t apologize,” she said softly, looking at him.

“It’s just that today was really nice, Ginny. And I don’t want what almost happened in the library to ruin it.”

“Do you, er, like me?” she cringed, as if afraid to hear his answer.

Her question rang out in his mind and he greatly considered his response. More than anything, he wanted to answer that he did, but fear over rushing into things washed over him. He took a deep breath before smiling at her. “I think I do, Gin.”

She lifted her eyes to meet his. She smiled shyly and he allowed himself a moment to just look at her. Without a word, they stood up, Harry leaving his share of the tab on the table and walked out of the room to await the return of their friends.

Later that night, Harry lay in the bed in the room he was sharing with Ron. Hermione and Ron had not yet returned. After retiring from the dining room, Ginny and Harry had spent a long time in front of the fire in the parlour, sitting close on the lounge. They had talked for a long time about each other and about Ron and Hermione. After the fire dwindled down and Ginny was yawning, they decided to call it a night. Ginny stood, stretching and looked down at Harry.

“G’night, Harry.”

He stood and smiled. “Night, Ginny.”

She smiled at him, bowing her head slightly and he moved closer to her. He moved his hand down to cup her chin and softly kissed her. She kissed back, the pressure ever so light.

She had left then and he shortly found himself in his bed, wondering where Ron was. Lying there, he felt renewed. Ginny had made him forget about all the things that had happened at the end of his fourth year. The tension between Hermione and Ron had placed a strain on the friendship of the trio and Harry felt whole again with this girl. She was a friend. There was no tension or awkwardness. They were just plain content with each other.

Shortly after Harry lay down, Ron burst into the room.

“Harry, mate, how are you?”

“Things went well with Hermione I take it?”

“She’s wonderful!”

Harry looked at Ron and shook his head again. It was hard to believe that this smitten boy standing in the middle of the room wearing pyjamas with little barking dogs on them was actually his best friend. In fact, he looked downright silly.

Ron eventually settled into his own bed, jabbering about the night. He and Hermione had walked through Diagon Alley and sat in the small park outside the library talking. He’d finally gotten the nerve to kiss her and she had kissed him back. Ron’s words began to fade as Harry drifted into sleep...

Entrerò nei vostri sogni e controllerò il vostro sonno.

Harry shot straight up in bed. Before he was able to finish “Ron, did you say something?” a white-hot pain shot through his scar, blinding Harry. Crying out, he collapsed and rolled off the bed onto the floor. He was vaguely aware of scrambling feet before he saw only blackness.

Harry opened his eyes, only to close them immediately. The Hogwarts hospital wing was brighter than usual. Slowly opening his eyes to allow adjustment to the bright lights, he noticed Professor Dumbledore standing over the bed, watching him.

“Good morning Harry.”

“What happened?”

“Well, according to Mr Weasley and Miss Granger, you awoke in the middle of the night, screamed in pain and fell to the floor. Hermione rushed into the room and activated the portkey I gave you. She brought you here. Harry, what happened?”

“I... The scar... The words... I heard words in my head. It was some sort of charm. I woke up at the sound of the voice and suddenly my scar hurt. After that, I don’t know.”

"Do you know what the words were?"

"Harry! Oh thank Merlin you're all right!" Hermione cried out, bursting into the hospital wing. She was at Harry’s bedside in just a few moments and bent down to hug him.

"Where are Ginny and Ron?"

"They've gone back to the Leaky Cauldron."

"Well, Harry and Hermione, I think we've done all we can for now. However, Harry if anything happens, any strange dreams, thoughts or pains, you must owl me immediately. Also, I want Hermione to accompany you to Privet Drive for the next

few weeks, until we have gotten any clues about what happened."

"I don't think that Hermione will be able to come there. Aunt Petunia--"

Dumbledore held up a hand. "I have contacted your Aunt Petunia. Arrangements have been made. Harry, why don't you get dressed and then I will arrange for you to be taken back to the Leaky Cauldron."

Harry and Hermione nodded their agreement and she walked out with Dumbledore, leaving Harry alone with his thoughts.

He felt himself shudder. He could already feel that something was not quite right in his head. He felt relieved, however, that he would not be alone. Dressing quickly, he met Hermione in the hallway. She was holding a portkey in her hand, waiting for Harry to finish dressing.

They arrived in the courtyard behind the Leaky Cauldron. Harry nearly collapsed as a wall of exhaustion suddenly hit him. Hermione put her arm around his waist and half-carried him up to the room.

Ron and Ginny were sitting anxiously in the sitting room. When the door opened, they leapt to their feet, Ginny rushing to Harry. In a heartbeat, she had her arms around him bawling into his shoulder.

"Oh, Harry, what happened? I was so worried. Are you alright?" Ginny looked at him with her wide brown eyes, unable to conceal the fear and concern she felt for Harry. He had an arm loosely around her waist and attempted to hide his shock at her outburst. His other arm was still grasping Hermione, who was looking at Ginny in confusion.

Silently, Ginny withdrew from Harry and gave Hermione an odd glance, before moving farther back.

"I think it's best if Harry lays down for awhile. We will be leaving for Privet Drive in an hour or so. When will you be going back to the Burrow?"

"Actually, we were just waiting for you to come back before we left. There's a car waiting for us downstairs," Ron replied, smiling at Hermione. However, she just nodded. She led Harry to the boys' room and returned to the lounge.

Harry stretched out on the bed. He rolled over and heard a light crunch. Moving aside, he picked up the parchment envelope lying on his pillow.

Mr. Harry Potter

The Bed by the Window

The Leaky Cauldron

London

Mr. Potter,

This letter is to inform you that the exam kit for your entrance to the Hogwarts School of Intensive Magical Study will be arriving in three days' time. It is in your best interests to prepare yourself accordingly for this exam. The test will arrive mid-morning and further instructions will be enclosed. Best of luck.

Professor Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

Harry pulled himself off of the bed, swinging one heavy leg at a time over the edge. He stood gingerly, for the pain that had so mercilessly burst into his scar seemed to have drained into his body. He was aching and exhausted. He slowly made his way into the lounge, where Ginny was waiting for Ron to finish saying goodbye to Hermione. Noticing him, she strolled over and he pulled her into a loose hug. Pulling from her own resolve and strength, his hold tightened and he leaned down to kiss her lightly on the lips.

"Thanks for worrying about me."

"Oh, Harry, I always worry about you."

He hugged her again until Ron tugged on his arm.

"As upset as I am to break up this little snog session, I really must take my ickle Ginny back home to Mum," Ron chortled.

Ginny glared but obligingly followed him, giving Harry a small wave. Hermione walked to him and the strength that he had pulled for Ginny vanished and he collapsed again, feeling as if he'd just fought a terrible battle. Hermione moved him towards a settee and vanished to get their things.

When Hermione reappeared, he smiled up at her. "Herm, you're the best friend a bloke could ask for," he declared, clasping her hand.

"Hush now. Don't waste too much energy. Here, stand up," she smiled at him.

He obliged and she walked him downstairs to the awaiting ministry car. He felt lighter than he had before. He realised, shocked, that Hermione was levitating him slightly. Upon questioning her, the answer he received startled him.

"It's just a little something I picked up. Most wizards and witches can do some magic without a wand. Its virtually untraceable, so I'm not that worried."

Harry just nodded, wondering whether or not he could do wandless magic.

Reading his mind, Hermione said, "Yes, you can too. You probably never noticed. I realized you had to be doing it when I moved your rucksack today. It was as heavy as a trunk!"

"Hmph. I didn't even notice," Harry lied, not wishing to tell Hermione about the book a few nights ago.

"I figured as much."

They settled into the car and Hermione encouraged him to take a light nap. He drifted off slowly into a light slumber, desperate for the rest.

When they arrived at Privet Drive, Hermione gently shook Harry awake.

He opened his eyes suddenly remembering, "Hermione! Did you read the letter?"

"Yes, don't worry. I received the letter while you were passed out in the hospital wing."

"Oh. What did yours say?"

"The same thing as yours, I'm sure."

Harry was about to ask her about the study sheets that they had drawn up when he noticed a strange noise coming from the open kitchen window of Number Four.

Hermione had heard it too and looked at him strangely. They both looked toward the house. Suddenly a shout rang out into the street.

"Oh Arabella! Turn the volume up, I love this song!"

Harry recognized the voice of his Aunt Petunia. His shock deepened as he recognized the song. "Simply Bewitched" by Celestina Warbeck was blasting through the neighbourhood. Harry realized that the next-door neighbour was preening her roses and didn't seem to acknowledge the song. Looking quickly at Hermione, they both rushed into the house.

The sight that met Harry's eyes nearly caused him to fall over in shock. His aunt was standing in the middle of the kitchen with a wand in her hand. She flicked it at the oven and two-dozen chocolate cookies sailed out and onto the cooling racks spread on the counter. A young blond witch stood at the sink, merrily waving her wand at a cake. Thick white icing was streaming out the end of the long wand and onto the cake. She winked at Petunia and reached over to change the dial on a small red box on the counter. Harry recognized it as a receiver for the Wizard Wireless Network. Harry pinched himself until his eyes watered, yet the scene didn't change.

"Petunia!" he cried out.

The radio snapped off and a batch of cookies that Petunia had been levitating crashed to the floor as a stream of white icing hit the wall behind the sink.

"Harry! What are you doing here? I didn't expect you until after dinner."

"Why do you have a wand? Who is that? What in the bloody hell is going on here?" Harry demanded, practically screaming the last question.

"Harry, dear, I think you need to sit down," answered his aunt.

"I won't sit down! Who are you? What's going on?"

Everyone just stared at Harry, looking as if he were about to explode.

"SOMEONE BLOODY ANSWER ME!" Harry bellowed.

Quietly, his aunt met his harsh look.

"The truth, Harry, is that I am a witch."

Chapter Three: The Dragon Mirror

Harry looked at his Aunt Petunia in absolute horror. The world seemed suddenly very unreal. How could his aunt be a witch? She had always treated him horribly. Wasn't she the one who had locked all of his supplies in the closet under the stairs? Of the entire Dursley family, Petunia had been the worst. Harry could escape Dudley and ignore Vernon but the hate he had always felt from his aunt had been the most horrible thing of all. A part of Harry had always wished she'd been more matronly to him. But she hadn't. She had been awful.

The past few days' events rushed at Harry. He was sucked into a whirlwind of exams, books, spells, kisses, pain and the never ending "I'm a witch". Without further ado, Harry did the only thing he was capable of. He simply let himself go. Collapsing on the floor, he began to cry. The silent cry of pain and overwhelming confusion. Not saying a word, Hermione bent next to him and held his hand.

He looked at her and saw a look of pure terror on her face. She was as frightened as he was. He looked at the blond witch, who looked as if she wanted to vanish on the spot. Finally, a peek at Petunia revealed that she too was crying.

Another jolt of emotion ran through Harry, although this time it was a horrible anger. The tears dried as he gathered himself into a standing position.

"Why, then, have you been the most horrible wench for the past fourteen years?"

Hermione gasped as Petunia winced.

"Tell me, Harry, do you know about the Dragon Mirror?"

His lack of response urged Petunia on.

"Maybe you should sit down, Harry."

"I am sitting," he replied from his spot on the kitchen floor.

"A thousand years ago, at the time of the Founding of Hogwarts, Rowena Ravenclaw, a great seer, enchanted a mirror as a gift to Salazar Slytherin. The mirror would behold the future only to the pure at heart. Of course, Slytherin was never able to see into the Mirror. If he looked too deeply in an attempt to discern anything, the Mirror would temporarily blind him. He scorned Rowena for the gift and threatened to destroy it. However, it could not be destroyed. He finally hid the Mirror in a deep tomb, purely out of hatred for Rowena. Obviously, she was crushed. The Mirror had been a beautiful and priceless gift--"

"Petunia, what does this have to do with me?"

She looked saddened, but she held her ground. "Harry, I know I haven't given you

much these years, but please, listen?"

He looked at her blue eyes, which were clear and bright and full of a pain he couldn't understand. "Fine."

"It was not discovered until much later in the early 20th century. Found by the wizard Grindewald, it showed the young man a great future of power and omnipotence. The young wizard had still been pure of heart. He saw this future and became consumed with the idea of an absolute power. He consulted the mirror, for he had not yet begun his killings and Dark Arts studies. It is unknown how Grindewald became immersed in the Dark Arts, but he was no longer able to use the Mirror. He still kept it in his castle, for it symbolized power. Then one day a young maiden in the castle stopped to gaze at the Mirror. She saw the defeat of Grindewald by an even more powerful wizard. When Grindewald heard this unfounded prediction, he killed the girl. Shortly thereafter, he began to lose the war. The Light side was winning and suddenly from the depths of the Light army came a young wizard by the name of Albus Dumbledore. Grindewald was defeated in one duel and Dumbledore inherited the Mirror."

"I don't see what this has to do with anything," he interrupted her again. She paused, giving him another look. Her jaw set in agitation as she continued her story.

"Dumbledore kept the Mirror in his office, but he never looked into the depths of it. Dumbledore has never wished to know the future for certain. Your mother had been in there one afternoon, visiting Dumbledore. It was after she had already left school. You were just a few months short of one at the time. She saw the continuation of the Dark War. She saw the death of herself and James. She saw you live. She saw everything in that Mirror, Harry. After confronting Albus, he told her that it was up to her as to what she would do.

"Your mother came to me. I had gone to Beauxbatons instead of Hogwarts and was not familiar with the Mirror. Your mother's friends knew very little of me, with the exception of James. She had been terribly angry with me when I chose Beauxbatons and scorned me for not attending Hogwarts, but we eventually worked through our differences. She came to me and we formulated a plan. Based on what she had seen in the Mirror, your mother begged that if anything were to happen, I would take you in. However, she saw that you would be hunted, even as a baby. Even if the Dark Lord was gone, his followers would be furious. We had to hide you. I quit my acting career-

"Your acting career?"

"Yes, I was an actress after finishing my schooling and travelled over Britain performing in wizarding drama troupes."

Harry's eyes widened as the facts clicked in his mind. The name and the disappearance...even the eyes. "You're Amarante Zinia?"

She nodded. "Zinia is my stage name, yes. I left for you Harry. Your mother and I searched for a way to hide you and we found that a girl we had grown up with had passed away. We had all been friends when we were older, but when your mother was

accepted to Hogwarts and we confided in her why, she was jealous and called both of us freaks and swore she would never speak again. We broke a lot of wizarding laws, but I obliviated her husband's memory of the death before an obituary was ever released."

"That doesn't explain why you've been so horrible to me all this years," he spat out.

"The only excuse that I may offer was your protection Harry. The wizarding world expected a strong, independent boy. You were a wonderful child, but I had to act like Petunia Dursley. You resisted and became the young man you are today. Your parents would be very proud of you."

"How did Vernon know about my parents though? What would make him say the horrible things he did about them?" Harry said softly, his mind still trying to work through all this new information.

"I had already assumed the identity of Petunia. He found you on the step, right where I expected you to be. I had led him to believe that I'd always had a sister who was different than him and he automatically hated her. Vernon is very real and very hateful."

"Does Dumbledore know?"

"Of course. He has helped as much as possible along the way. For years, I've had Dumbledore bind my magic. There was no way you could know of the magic world. Of course, very few others knew. Arabella knew because she was one of the operatives assigned to protect you. The only other two people on the planet are Drs. Richard and Rachel Granger."

At this Hermione cried out. "What do you mean?" Her face was very red and she looked shocked.

Petunia gasped and covered her mouth, "Oh no, you weren't supposed to know. Oh my, Hermione, I'm not sure I should be the one to tell you this."

Hermione looked at her, her facial expression a mixture of horror and anger. "You can't just say that and then not explain!"

Amarante looked torn. She winced and sighed before continuing, "Your parents aren't Muggles. Fancy that two of the most powerful wizards of our time are being forced to live as Muggles. They are very powerful, almost as much as Harry's parents. You are no muggleborn, my dear."

"But they're dentists!"

"What did you expect them to be, psychics?"

"How could I have not known? Wouldn't others have recognized my name?"

"Not likely. Your parents went into hiding nearly 17 years ago. The name Granger

became taboo in the wizarding world because so many felt betrayed by them. The good witches and wizards felt deserted and the name was almost as bad to say as Voldemort. Anyone who even noticed the surname would think it a coincidence. Granger isn't exactly an uncommon name."

Hermione looked as Harry felt. Their worlds were shattering to pieces around them. Her parents were wizards; his aunt was a witch. They clung to each other, both lost and feeling very alone.

The slamming of the front door broke the silence in the kitchen.

"Ami! Are you here? Is everything alright?" The man who could only be Rick Granger shouted as he came dashing into the kitchen, brandishing his wand. "I was sitting at home enjoying a glass of sherry with my wife when the alert charm goes off. Did something happen?"

It was at this point that Rick noticed Harry and Hermione on the floor of the kitchen. Their backs were to the refrigerator, hands clasped tightly together. Paling, he knelt in front of his daughter.

"Hermione, darling, are you alright?"

"Dad, you're really a wizard?"

"Yes."

"M-Mum too?"

He nodded, moving closer to her and reaching a hand out to touch her face.

She turned away, wiping away a tear. "Why couldn't you tell me?"

"We had to protect you, Hermione." He waited for a reply. "Please, look at me."

Hermione burst into tears and collapsed against Harry. Deciding that he'd had enough news for one afternoon, Harry pulled her to her feet and put his arms protectively around her. She leaned against him and without a word to the adults, they went upstairs.

He led her into the guestroom and without much prompting, she climbed onto the bed and lay back against the pillows, her face wet with tears.

He looked at her for a moment before sitting next to her and pulling her into a big hug. "Shh... it'll be okay, Mione," whispered Harry as he smoothed her chestnut hair away from her face.

"Harry, how can it be true? We've been lied to our entire lives. How is that protection?"

"I don't know, Hermione."

“They’ve deprived us, Harry. They took away the lives we were meant to have.”

A knock sounded on the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me, Harry.”

“What do you want, Aunt Petunia, er... Amarante?” he answered through the closed door, irritation evident in his reply.

“I wanted to give you this. And call me Ami,” she said as she opened the door.

Harry took the letter from her outstretched hand. She bowed her head and backed out of the room, closing the door. Harry looked at the parchment in his hand. It looked ages old and his name was scrawled in an unfamiliar hand. Taking a deep breath, he broke the wax seal (purple with a flower he did not immediately recognize) and shakily opening the letter.

Dear Harry,

Your father and I have spent years fighting in this war against Voldemort. When I became pregnant with you, we seriously questioned whether or not we could continue our fight, or give up so that your life would in no way be risked. I hope that one day you can forgive us for deciding to continue our battle. We never wanted to see you grow up in a world where that darkness pervaded the way of life.

By now, I’m hoping that Amarante has come forward with the story of the Dragon Mirror. She is to give you this letter on your 17th birthday, unless it became absolutely necessary that you know the truth.

I hope that you can forgive us for this too, but I hope you can understand why we had to do it. I hope you know that it was for your protection.

I am hoping that you will never see this letter, that what I saw will never come true, but if it does, know that your father and I will always be watching over you. Know that we have always had dreams for you. Hogwats, Gryffindor, Quidditch (though that was mostly your father, I’m terrified of flying.), all the wonders that are out there are within your reach Harry.

Always remember that we love you and that you are never alone. I know what Amarante will have to do if she is to act the part of Petunia, but she has always loved you and spoiled you the most of any of us. There is another girl who is in your year at Hogwarts, you may know her, Hermione Granger. Her parents were dear friends of ours and she is in a situation very similar to yours. Maybe you know her or are friends with her and can help each other through the pain that this has undoubtedly caused you.

I’m sorry that you had to find this out at such a late date, but there was no other way.

We will always love you, Harry.

Mum and Daddy

Harry choked back a sob. It was true. All of it. His life had been mostly a lie. He absently handed the letter to Hermione. The truth. It had been there in the flowing script of his mother, written in an Ever-changing Ink Quill. Ami had not lied. Hermione read the letter much faster than he could and turned her gaze to him.

“Harry, are you alright?” she asked quietly, after reading the letter.

“No. Are you?” he answered, not looking at her, but at the palms of his hands.

“No, but what can we do, Harry? We can’t erase the past. In a sense, I’m rather excited that my parents are wizards. But we’ve been lied to and even though I understand why, it hurts.”

Harry hugged her, “Shall we go downstairs?”

Hermione nodded, grasping Harry’s arm for support on their short journey to the kitchen.

The blond witch was seated at the table with Amarante, Rick and another chestnut haired witch who looked strikingly like Hermione. Harry had seen her parents before, at the train station and in Diagon Alley, but he felt as if he was looking at them for the first time. They were slightly different. Hermione’s mother’s hair was curly, rather than straight as it had been at Diagon Alley. Her father’s hair was brown with grey flecks, as it had been, but he looked much younger. He realised that they must have had some disguise and couldn’t help but look at them, feeling as if they were complete strangers.

“Mum!” Hermione cried, running to the woman, her earlier anger gone.

“Oh Hermione! I’m so, so sorry. Please forgive me. I wanted so badly to tell you, but I couldn’t. Do you understand?” Rachel Granger asked, her eyes wet with unshed tears.

“Of course,” sobbed Hermione, clinging tightly to her mother.

“Harry, this is Dr. Rick Granger, Hermione’s father. This is Dr. Rachel Granger and to my left is Arabella Figg,” Amarante gestured to each person sitting at the table, looking determined to get to whatever business she appeared to have.

“Figg?”

“Yes, Harry, I am old Mrs. Figg. Watched you since you were ickle Harry,” she said, smiling broadly at him, her voice light.

Harry glared, not in the mood for amusing antics. Arabella bowed her apology and stared at her hands.

“There are a few things we need to clear up. Rachel and Rick know about the return of Voldemort. They are beyond recognition at this point, but there are a few minor details they must attend to before Hermione can return home. I am safe, as is Arabella. However, you cannot tell a soul about this. Not Ron or Ginny. No one. You will jeopardize the lives of many people if you do. We are not the only ones in hiding. There are countless others. This won’t be easy, but it’s necessary. Right now, there is only one thing we can do.”

“Please do not say ‘memory charm’,” begged Harry, the fear that his new knowledge would disappear scrawled across his face.

“Harry, have you heard of the Fidelius Charm?”

“Of course, it’s how Pettigrew betrayed my parents.”

“Very good. Rick, Rachel and myself have been called back to Dumbledore. He needs our help in this new war. However, we can’t just show up in Diagon Alley. We need you and Hermione to become our secret-keepers.”

Hermione and Harry nodded their agreement without hesitation. Ami began in great detail to describe how the charm would work. Hermione would be the secret-keeper of the Grangers and Harry would hide his aunt. They all began discussing the procedure when the doorbell rang. All at once, Rick and Rachel disappeared and Arabella became an old lady again. Harry and Hermione hid in the small coatroom off of the kitchen while his Aunt ‘Petunia’ answered the door.

“Ah, Ami, my dear, how are we this fine evening? Where are Rick and Rachel? Is Arabella here?” Albus Dumbledore said as he entered the kitchen, “Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger, do come out of the coat room, what would Mr. and Ms. Weasley think?” Dumbledore teased, eyes twinkling mischievously.

Harry silently thanked Merlin. He was relieved to see Dumbledore. The idea that Dumbledore had known all along made everything much easier to digest. Not surprisingly, Dumbledore knew what had transpired that evening. He turned to Hermione and Harry.

"Harry, Hermione, what you are about to do may be one of the most important things you'll ever take part in. Are you positive that you will be able to hold this secret?"

"Yes, Professor Dumbledore. They were able to keep a secret for fourteen years to save our lives, and that was without the help of a spell. Surely we can do the same for them," Hermione announced, sounding much braver than she looked. Dumbledore nodded and began explaining how the spell would work. Once everything was explained and it was made sure that Harry and Hermione understood completely, Dumbledore began a slow incantation.

With a few muttered words, Harry, Amarante, Hermione, Rick and Rachel were transported to a darkened room. Dumbledore stood in the dim light in the centre. Harry noticed the tall walls, made entirely of a rough looking stone. The room was

empty save three chairs in the middle of the room, directly before Dumbledore. Without instruction, Hermione and her parents went to the chairs, Hermione sitting in the middle of her parents.

Dumbledore withdrew his wand from a pocket in his robe and held it before them. His voice deepened as he began another slow incantation. Harry saw a fine mist began to settle over the scene in front of him and the voice of Dumbledore echoed through the smoky veil, low and confident, but muffled. He heard the voice of Hermione's father, sounding as if he was repeating the words that Dumbledore had just spoken. The haze surrounding the group thickened and Rachel too repeated Dumbledore's incantation. The haze became impenetrable and all Harry saw was faint shadows. The voices were muffled, but he recognised Hermione's voice beginning to speak. The mist suddenly faded and loud and clearly, he heard Hermione and Dumbledore say "*Fidelius!*" There was a blinding flash of light. The entire area went black for a moment before the same dim light that was there when they entered came up. Hermione sat alone, facing Dumbledore, he was holding his wand lowered at his side. She shook her head slightly, turning to the left and to the right before standing up and moving to where Ami and Harry were. She nodded wordlessly at them, directing them to where Dumbledore was standing.

Dumbledore motioned them to the two chairs directly in front of him. Ami and Harry sat down and took out their wands as Dumbledore began to chant. Ami turned to face Harry, placing her wand directly over Harry's heart. She mumbled the words Dumbledore had spoken and a thin band of blue light connected Harry's chest to the tip of Ami's wand. The mist that Harry had seen around Hermione and her parents appeared around him and Ami. He noticed that Ami had spoken, she had faded. By the she had finished, she was fuzzy around the edges and looked slightly transparent. He was so focused on the fact that his aunt was slowly disappearing that he almost forgot to repeat what Dumbledore was asking him to. He repeated the words slowly, fumbling over the unfamiliar pronunciations of the foreign language. He finished and the blue banded from Ami's wand deepened. Ami faded further as Dumbledore began to speak and the fog around them thickened. Harry took his own wand, as instructed, drawing it between himself and Ami. A red band appeared and fused with the blue as Dumbledore spoke. He looked at Harry, giving a nod to him. In unison, they uttered the final incantation and the two beams of light completely fused, exploding in a flash of purple light. He felt more than saw the soul of his aunt enter his own. He felt her presence next to him only briefly before once more, there was blackness. The room lightened and Harry closed his eyes, surprised to see Ami, just as she stood, right next to him. Slightly unnerved, he opened his eyes and looked at Hermione, attempting to ascertain some sort of reaction. There was none and in an instant, he and Hermione were back on Privet Drive.

Harry felt very alone in the house, even with Hermione standing by his side. Dumbledore appeared once more in the kitchen.

"Very good, Harry and Hermione. I am going back to the school. Should you need anything, owl me. Thank you for all that you have done today. The world may one day thank you."

With that, Dumbledore was gone. Arabella Figg strutted into the living room.

“So, where are they?” she chided.

Harry and Hermione looked horrified.

“Only joking. Now, off to bed with you. In the morning, we’ll talk about the rest of the summer.”

Harry and Hermione walked up the stairs, having not said two words to each other since the incantation. Harry attempted to break the silence.

“Can you see them when you close your eyes?”

“Yeah, it’s really weird. I can see wherever--. I don’t think it’s a good idea to talk about this Harry.”

“You’re probably right. Err, well, here’s your room. Goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight, Harry,” she said solemnly, looking at the floor. She closed the door and he continued to his bedroom. He suddenly wished he could communicate with Ami or anyone for that matter; the house felt so empty.

Just as his mind wished it, he felt a sudden spark in his mind.

Hello?

Harry! Is something wrong?

No. Ami? What’s going on?

I suppose, it’s a mind link. So that we can communicate. Did you need something?

Well, I was wondering, since you’re a witch and all, what are you going to do about Vernon?

Vernon has left me. He took Dudley to live in Kent. I had to pretend I was very hurt. It was quite difficult, but let’s not forget that I am an actress.

Won’t he be wanting the house back?

No, he assured me that if I let him take Dudley and signed the papers quietly; I could take the house and car.

Had you two been fighting?

Yes, constantly. You see, the magic bind wore off this winter. I woke up in the morning and Vernon was on the roof. He’d been snoring the night before. He was right upset. Ever since then, the marriage has been on the rocks. Not that I minded too horribly, of course.

I'm sure. Harry responded, giggling as he did so.

Did you need anything else?

Are you in the house?

Of course, I'm lying in bed right now, watching Eastenders.

Oh, sorry to have disturbed you.

It's all right. I was actually hoping to talk to you for a while.

I'm sorry that I got so upset earlier.

Believe me, Harry, I expected it. I've been wanting to tell you since the morning I found you on my doorstep. You always were my favourite nephew.

Aren't I your only nephew?

Completely beside the point. I want to apologize to you as well. Harry, I know I've been awful the entire time you have stayed here. I had to, I hope you understand, but that doesn't make it all right.

I do understand. And I don't think it's something that necessarily heralds an apology. The letter from my mum cleared up the entire situation in my mind. It's too late now to change anything.

Right you are Harry.

What is the rest of the summer holiday going to be like?

Well, I do believe that in two days' time you have an exam. You and Hermione will take your exams. Arabella will be staying for the duration of the holidays. We can't very well have the neighbours thinking that two teenagers are living alone in the house. What would they think? Harry felt her smile. I haven't decided what we'll do for your birthday yet. Fancy a visit to the zoo? Again the smile. For the last two weeks of August, you and Hermione will be off to the Burrow. I'll be heading to Hogwarts at that point. Dumbledore has arranged for me to stay there until I no longer need a secret-keeper. Then I will move permanently to the wizarding world and enter the limelight by being amazingly found after all those years.

What happens if Sirius is cleared?

What do you mean?

Well, he's my godfather. But since you are a blood-relative...

Didn't you ever wonder about your godmother Harry?

You're my godmother? Of course, you are! How could I not have thought of that?

I'll let that one slide; you've had a rough day.

Thanks. Well, I'm heading off to bed now.

All right. Goodnight Harry. We'll need to limit this mind talking. It could be dangerous.

All right, good night Ami.

Harry felt the connection close. Almost instantly, his eyes became heavy and he was barely able to turn off his light before falling asleep.

Harry did not awake the next day until noon. He made his way down to the kitchen, where Hermione sat, still in her nightclothes. There was a note from Arabella, saying that she'd be out for the day.

As Harry walked to the sink for a glass of water, he glanced outside the window to the backyard.

The garden had been cleaned up for the summer and it was the first time he'd noticed. There were several patches of flowers in full bloom, along with shrubs and other plants, all of which created a very welcoming atmosphere.

"I saw the garden. Looks beautiful. There's a hammock strung up out there with my name on it. I'm taking my book and about a pitcher of lemonade," Hermione said, looking up from her breakfast.

"That sounds like a good idea. Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all, as long as you read. That's my plan and I'd prefer not to have it disrupted." She smiled at him and he was relieved to see it. She looked much lighter than she had yesterday and her eyes were no longer rimmed in red.

"Sounds good. I was thinking I should start reading *Hogwarts: A History* anyways." He returned her grin as she tossed her bunched up napkin at him.

"Great idea. There could be questions on the exam tomorrow."

"Maybe."

Harry grabbed an orange and retreated to his room. Much to his surprise, it had again changed.

The room was full of books. There was a large desk, which looked fully stocked, and the general atmosphere of the room was much friendlier, but the bed was gone, as were all of his things. Of course, Ami had magically altered the room. On the desk, he

found a small piece of parchment.

“*Aparecium*,” muttered Harry. The ink appeared on the parchment, just as expected.

Good morning, Harry! Sorry for the change in décor! I advise you try the room next door, you may find it to your liking.

A

Indeed, Harry did like it. Dudley’s old room had been completely redone. His bed was large and covered in a soft duvet cover. A wardrobe held new clothes, all Harry’s size. His Firebolt was propped in the corner. A large desk revealed drawers full of parchment, quills, schoolbooks, potion ingredients, owl treats and food, and a sundry of other wizard things.

Hedwig’s cage was perched in the corner and a window seat flanked by bookcases completed his new room.

Harry dashed down the stairs.

“Hermione! You have to see this!”

“What is it Harry?”

He nearly dragged her up the stairs and led her first to his room. She was amazed at the change and immediately dashed to her own.

It too had changed. There was all new furniture. Books and a doorway directly into the new library that used to be his old room pleased Hermione. The bed was larger than Harry’s and reminded him of the beds in Gryffindor tower. It was covered in a white duvet and surrounded by white, semi-opaque curtains.

When he showed Hermione the library, she gasped in surprise. Immediately she rushed to the closest shelf, running her fingers along the spines of the books. Finding a title she liked, she snatched it off of the shelf. She picked another one and handed it to Harry.

“*Hogwarts: A History*. That’s what I love about you Mione. I get an entire bookcase full of Quidditch books and you still insist I read this.”

“Here’s how I see it Harry. I’m going to get into the program. I can feel it. I want a friend with me and you are the most likely candidate.”

“Err... thanks, but what about Ron?”

“Ron’s wonderful, really. But in my opinion, you’re a much stronger wizard.”

“But he probably knows the wizarding world better than I do.”

“Doesn’t matter. Harry, don’t you understand what this program is all about?”

“Not really, I guess,” he replied, wondering how Hermione could possibly know what it was all about.

“It’s like a boot camp, Harry. They are finding the best and brightest at Hogwarts to train in this new war on Voldemort. My guess is that these tests are going to find our MQs. Once that is established, they’ll begin forming their army. We’ll practically be aurors, Harry.”

Harry was floored. Surely that couldn’t be the reason for this program? Then he realized that it had to be the reason. Why else would they have something like this?

“Hermione? What’s an MQ?”

“Well, you know what a Muggle IQ is, right?”

“Yeah, Dudley’s was pretty low.”

Resisting the urge to snicker, Hermione continued, “It’s like an IQ, but rather than intelligence, its magic.”

“Ah, I see.”

They continued their discussion of the test until they’d reached the hammock in the backyard. Once there, Hermione stuck to her guns. The talking stopped abruptly and with a wave of her hand, the pitcher of lemonade that Hermione had been levitating settled gently onto the grass, along with two glasses. Harry offered to pour their drinks as Hermione settled into the hammock, her book already cracked open.

Harry stretched out on the hammock next to Hermione placing his head at opposite the end. Harry was more calm and content than he had been for ages. He settled in and opened the book that Hermione had been on about for nearly five years.

They’d been sitting outside for about an hour when an owl flew into the yard. The small owl stopped on the hammock and began twittering around excitedly. Harry scooped up Ron’s owl, Pig, who had been jumping on Hermione’s legs. The owl was carrying two envelopes and had taken off just as Harry had untied the last string.

“Bloody Pig,” he cursed picking up an envelope addressed to Hermione. He handed it to her and opened the letter from Ginny.

Good afternoon! I just thought I’d drop you a line, as I won’t be seeing you until the end of the summer. I already miss you. Please write me soon.

Gin

Harry guessed that Ron's letter to Hermione had been very similar. Concentrating his focus on a piece of parchment in his new desk and a quill sitting on top of it, Harry mentally summoned the two objects out into the backyard. He was shocked when they floated into his open hand. He looked up and noticed Hermione watching him, "Very good. Quite a distance."

"Really?"

"Of course. And to think, you probably thought you couldn't even do it. I hate to say it, but I told you so," she said, a smile spreading across her face as she looked back down at her book.

"Yes, well, you are Hermione Granger. You know everything."

"Careful. I do believe I have a big, bad boyfriend to beat you up."

Harry shuddered, completely taken by surprise. *Hermione and Ron. Ginny and me.* The events of the past two days had caused Harry to completely forget the kiss. What had happened? He saw himself sitting with Hermione on the floor of the kitchen. Her soft hand was being held in his gently, but she was clenching his as if there were no tomorrow. He looked. The nail indentations were barely visible on the back of his hand. They had been through so much. They had both been so scared.

Hermione sat up with a jolt as if she were having the same thoughts as him.

"Heh." He looked at her, readjusting his glasses.

"Yeah," she replied looking down at the book in her lap.

Harry stood slowly and repositioned himself on the soft green grass. Hermione stretched out fully on the hammock, as if Harry lying there had been an impediment to her comfort.

Frowning, Harry contemplated this new development. He liked Ginny, he was sure of that now. However, Hermione had been with him every step of the way through this business with his aunt and through the pains from the scar. She had held his hand and he had held hers. It had meant nothing. He had not been unfaithful to Ginny. It was as if the opposite was true. It was if the letter from Ginny had somehow made him unfaithful to Hermione. She had been there for him. She was his best friend. How had he betrayed her?

"Harry?" said Hermione, almost breathily.

"Yes?" said Harry, startled.

"Can you please pour me another glass of lemonade?"

Harry did as asked and shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts.

It dawned on him slowly throughout the afternoon. By dinner he was unable to explain the feeling of guilt churning in his stomach. Hermione had stood by his side as he had hers. She had helped him and nursed him and held him. Yet when he was with Ginny, he had felt whole again, untouched by every worry in his life. It was of she had the ability to make him forget the terror there world was now facing, but where had Ginny been during this crisis? At the Burrow, and though that technically could not be helped, it still made a difference to him.

“Hermione! Harry! It’s time for tea!” Arabella called through the kitchen window.

Relieved that the tense afternoon was finally over, they picked up their things and went to the kitchen. Arabella had made a superb meal of bangers and mash, which Harry had to admit, tasted better than his aunt’s. After dinner, the three settled in front of the telly for a movie.

Harry headed to bed shortly thereafter. He had lain down in his bed, ready for a good night’s sleep. The exam would most likely be arriving in the morning and he wanted to be on his toes and at his best, but sleep would not come. Harry stared at the ceiling, which had been enchanted like the one at Hogwarts in the Great Hall. The sky was a deep, dark blue. The night was clear and the thousands of summer stars glittered coldly. Harry felt disconnected from the world. Everything had been turned upside down. He was still unsure of his aunt. His instinct told him that he deeply wanted to trust her. There was something holding him back and he wasn’t sure what. He was more scared than anything else. He was scared for his parents. What had it been like to know when and how you were going to die? He was scared for Hermione. Would she be able to see her parents anytime in the near future? She couldn’t very well go home. There were no visible adults there. If any of the Death Eaters made the connection between her and her parents, Hermione would be even more hunted. Now, she was wanted by association; if they found out, it would be a personal vendetta against her.

Harry was barely asleep when he heard the gentle creek of the door to his bedroom. The light, padded footsteps crept to his bed. He felt the far side of the bed sink, as someone crawled onto, no, into, his bed. He felt Hermione’s small form curl up next to him. Gingerly, he opened his eyes.

“Mione? Are you alright?”

“Oh, Harry, I had the worst dream. Voldemort tortured me. He put me under Imperius. I told him Harry. I told him where they were. He apparated, with me being pulled along, to wherever they were and he killed them, right in front of me. He turned the wand on me, but you swept in and saved me. But, Harry. I *told*.

” “Mione, you can’t tell under Imperius. The Fidelius Charm doesn’t work like that. The secret-keeper has to willingly give up their secret. It’ll be ok.”

“Harry, can I stay here with you? I’m so scared.”

“Of course, but only if I may ask you a question.”

“Alright.”

“Are you dating Ron?”

“Not officially. He kissed me and that was really it. I like him very much though. Why? Does me being in here bother you?”

“No. I just had the weirdest feeling,” Harry explained. He launched into the feelings he’d had that afternoon in the garden.

“Harry, I understand completely. I was thinking the same thing. I guess this is going to take some getting used to. The truth is that even though you and Ron were both my best friends, you have always been the better friend, but I suppose that’s because I’ve liked Ron for so long that I started to see him on a different level.”

Harry nodded. He was getting sleepy and told Hermione so. However, he looked over and she had already drifted asleep, curled up against him. He relaxed and listened to her breathing, deep and slowly.

Eventually, Harry joined Hermione in sleep, thinking about her nightmare until he was completely out.

Harry awoke slowly the next morning. His ceiling was showing a shimmering dawn, emblazed with vibrant shades of red and orange. The sun had already started to burn off the fog that had settled over the night. It was going to be a warm day, perfect summer weather. Harry looked at his new alarm clock which read "My aren't we up early this morning?" He laughed and turned to Hermione. She was snuggled amongst the many fluffy pillows heaped onto his bed. He had never seen her look more content but he supposed that was because he'd never seen her asleep. Harry picked out some of his new clothes and went into the bathroom to get showered.

When Harry emerged from the bathroom, he'd found that his spirits had lifted greatly. The windows in the house were opened and the smell of summer wafted through the upstairs corridor. He was clean and the events of the previous couple of days had retreated to the back of his mind. For the first time in a few weeks, Harry's mind was alert and he felt ready for the exams that would be arriving shortly.

Hermione had awakened during the time he'd been showering. He found her in the kitchen with Arabella. Her hair was still dripping and she looked better than she had in many, many months. When he entered the kitchen, she grinned at him.

"Good morning, Harry! Isn't it a beautiful day? Arabella has made us a superb breakfast and we were just thinking how nice it would be to eat out back on the table in the garden."

"That sounds like a wonderful idea."

They carried the fresh-baked muffins and fresh-squeezed orange juice outside. There were delectable summer fruits, eggs, tea, and milk. They immediately began eating, filling the silence in between bites with conversation about the food, the weather and, of course, the exam. As soon as breakfast was finished, Arabella banished the dishes to the kitchen and they settled in the grass to catch some sun.

At around ten o'clock, Harry's heart jumped as he heard the quick flapping of wings. Two large owls swooped into the yard and each dropped a parcel to the Hogwarts students. Hermione gave Harry a nervous smile as they carried the packages indoors. Hermione headed to the library and Harry to his bedroom. Before disappearing behind the doors to the library, Hermione turned to Harry.

"Good luck. I know you'll do fantastic."

"Thanks Mione. Good luck to you too."

Harry settled at his desk. He opened the package and a single piece of parchment fell out, along with two quills and a small, black box. He looked at the parchment.

Good morning Harry Potter. It is now time to begin your entrance exam to the Hogwarts School of Intensive Magical Study. When you are ready to begin, activate the small box enclosed by saying the necessary charm. Your first test will be in Transfiguration, followed by Charms, Potions theory, curses, History of Magic, Divination theory and ending with Magical Creatures. Please try your best to answer each question and perform each task with as much accuracy as possible. You will have three hours within which you may complete the exam. It is recommended that you do not leave any questions blank and you do not rush through this test. Take your time and best of luck.

Harry activated the small black box. Almost immediately, a voice swelled from the box.

"Welcome to the entrance exam for the Hogwarts School of Intensive Magical Study. Your first test this morning will be in Transfiguration. Please note the first question on the enclosed piece of parchment."

Please transform this button into a beetle.

Harry looked at the box, which was now a button. Muttering the charm, he watched as the button grew, sprouted legs and hurried to prevent it from scuttling across the desk. It changed back into the box almost instantly.

"Please continue with the next question."

Harry did so and the Transfiguration exam went on for twenty minutes. The Charms portion of the exam was practical, Potions theory was a written exam (Harry thanked his lucky stars), curses was also a practical exam which ended with Harry feeling horrible for the spider that had surfaced from the box only to suffer from curse after curse. History of Magic was a written exam with a short essay on the founding of

Hogwarts. Harry was thrilled to learn that the Divination test had only multiple-answer questions. He wasn't sure if the exam graders would take kindly to a load of made-up fatal predictions on the part of Harry. His final exam was the easiest. It involved matching characteristics with various magical creatures.

Harry finished the exam is just over two hours. As soon as he'd laid down his quill, the parchment, quills and box disappeared, leaving a small note behind.

You have finished your entrance exam. You will be notified of the exam results in three weeks' time.

Folding his arms across the desk, Harry let out an audible sigh. The exam had been simple enough but he was still worried to let Hermione down. What if his transformations hadn't been fast enough or his recollection of the founding of Hogwarts wasn't right? He had a feeling that Hermione would be upset with him if he didn't get accepted into the school.

There was a knock on the door and Hermione peeked her head in.

"Are you done?"

"Yeah, I just finished. How do you think you did?"

"Oh Harry! It was so easy! I think I'll definitely get in. At least, I hope I do."

"I'm sure you will. You're the smartest witch I know."

"I'm nervous now. I hate waiting."

"Oh, I'm sure it'll fly by."

"I hope so."

"Let's go find Arabella so that we can celebrate getting these things over with."

With that, Harry and Hermione dashed down the stairs, happy at the moment to be rid of their most pressing concern.

Chapter Four: Terre de la Douleur

It was 11:59 pm on July 30th. Harry stared at his Muggle alarm clock. In just under a minute he would be fifteen years old. Harry was beginning to get excited about the prospect of turning fifteen. Hermione was there and his aunt would be there in a way. He hoped that this birthday would be better than the years past.

At the strike of twelve, Harry's bedroom door flung open at the exact moment that his aunt's voice heralded birthday wishes inside his head.

"Happy Birthday Harry!" cried Hermione, across the room in a flash. She hopped onto the bed and stood at his feet. "Harry! Harry! Are you awake? It's your birthday Harry!"

Harry searched for a response to this new experience. Hermione was standing on his bed in purple pajamas covered in yellow duckies and her hair in twin plaits. She was clutching two birthday presents in her arms and looked positively...adorable. Feeling very unlike fifteen, Harry jumped to join her. She dropped the gifts she was holding and gave him a big birthday hug.

"I just wanted to say 'Happy Birthday' and give you the first presents of your birthday."

"What did you get me?"

"You're just going to have to open them!"

Harry sunk to the bed and grabbed the package that was closest to him. It was a cardboard box with holes cut in the side. Harry gave it a light shake and was very surprised to hear a muted "Hey!" He stared at it in shock.

"Go on! Open it!" Hermione squealed, grinning from ear to ear.

Harry gingerly did so. As soon as he had untied the ribbon, the top of the box skyrocketed off and landed three feet to the left of Harry's bed. In the blink of an eye, a small chocolate coloured teddy bear hopped from the box. Harry stared incredulously at the tiny cub dressed in what looked like a Muggle policeman's outfit. The bear turned to look at Harry.

"You there! How goes it?" shouted the animal, pointing at Harry, who looked to Hermione for guidance.

"Isn't he a riot? I found him at a store in Diagon Alley. He says a few different things; he's enchanted, but only to a certain degree. Apparently, he just walks around extraordinarily suspicious of everything."

"Then why on earth did you get him for me?"

“Oh, I saw him in the store and thought of you. I thought he might be perfect for torturing Dudley, but I guess now he’ll just be entertainment.”

“What’s his name?”

“Sir, you may address me only as Chief Pip!”

“Err... hello, Chief Pip.”

“Who are you?”

“Harry Potter.”

At this, the bear put his hand to his chin as if scratching his beard. “Harry Potter? Do you trust him, Miss?” he asked Hermione.

“Oh, implicitly, sir, I assure you.”

Chief Pip gave her a curt nod and reached out a miniature paw to Harry. Bewildered, Harry shook it. “I’m off to patrol the grounds!” shouted the bear as he gave them a quick salute and dashed from the room.

Hermione watched with glee as Pip ran from the room. She turned to Harry, who gave her a very grim face. As her face fell, “You don’t like him do you?”

“Hermione, that is absolutely, most definitely, the funniest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Hermione brightened and resumed her cheerful grin, “I’m glad you like him. Oh! Open the last one!”

As per her request, Harry began to untie the ribbon from the brightly coloured package. He opened the box, somewhat leery of anything jumping out at him. Instead he found a mish-mash of odd items.

“A dog collar? Lead? Dog bowls? Are these for the Chief?”

“No, silly. Those are for the present you’ll get in the morning.”

“Would it by any chance be a dog?”

“I’m not going to tell you. I’m off to bed though. Happy Birthday.”

She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and a hug before heading towards the door.

“Hermione!”

She turned towards him expectantly. Three times during the past week, she had come to his room in the middle of the night, terrorized by horrible dreams of Voldemort.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Hermione, have you gone to bed tonight?”

“Not exactly. I laid in my bed reading. Does that count?”

“Are you afraid of the nightmares?”

Her brave façade fell. Her face crumpled as she walked to his bed.

“Oh, Harry! They’re just so awful. In each dream, someone close to me dies. Ron, my parents, your Aunt, Arabella, even Draco Malfoy. They seem so real. I’m just so scared,” she whispered as she sunk to Harry’s bed, her eyes wide.

“Hermione, it’ll all be okay. I promise you, I’ll do everything I can to protect you.”

“But Harry, Voldemort is such a powerful wizard. He could kill you with a thought!”

“Do you honestly believe that?”

“I just don’t know Harry. I just don’t know.”

“It’ll be ok. Don’t worry. Nothing is happening to us now.”

“But don’t you see? Things are happening Harry. The Fidelius Charm, The new school program, Dumbledore’s operatives... Harry, they’re preparing for a war.”

“Yes, they are. But we can’t worry about it now.”

“I can’t help it.”

Harry shushed her. He enveloped her in a tight hug and she sighed against his chest. As the minutes ticked away, her breathing deepened and slowed. The heaving sobs subsided and she settled into a restful slumber. He watched her for a few minutes. Suddenly, he felt his mind opening.

Harry?

Yes?

Is everything all right?

Yes, of course, why?

I heard Hermione crying, is she all right?

Yes, she’s here with me.

Harry, may I ask you a question?

Sure.

Is there something going on with Hermione?

No, Aunt Ami. She's just been having really bad nightmares lately. She ends up staying in here most nights.

I didn't mean the nightmares.

Oh, no! Her meaning clicked in his mind. Hermione is my best friend. I'm just trying to help her out.

All right, I trust you. Just be careful Harry.

I know. Thanks for worrying about me.

I always have, I always have. Well, I'm going back to bed. Good night.

Good night.

Happy Birthday Harry.

Thanks.

Harry shut his eyes and leaned against the pillows. Hermione was curled against him, as was her usual habit. *She better not get too used to this, school starts in a month.*

Harry sat straight up, blinking furiously. He shook his head as he looked around him. Everywhere around him was a dark gray mist. He waved his hand in front of himself and cleared a small pocket of the mist away. He realized that he was sitting on something very hard and looked down. Underneath was a cement bench. He was in a cell of some sort; that much he could surmise. He rose and peered at the bench. There was nothing unusual about it. Looking beyond the bench, he noticed what must have been a wall to the cell. It looked like a rose-colored glass, but Harry noted that he could not see that much on the other side. He felt along the wall, looking for some sort of door or window.

After doing a thorough search of the four walls in the room, Harry could come only to two conclusions. The first was that he was in a pyramid shaped room and the second was that there was absolutely no way to get out of it.

Completely perplexed, but having not yet reached the point of terrified, Harry sat back on the bench to figure out the situation. He sat there for only a few moments

before hearing a voice.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Harry Potter. I’ve been waiting for a long time to see you.”

“Who are you?”

“For now, you may call me Tristram.”

“If I may say, that is a very odd name.”

“Perhaps. But at least it’s not as horribly common as Harry.”

“Yes, well, where am I?”

“In a cell.”

“Well, that much was apparent. Where is the cell then?”

“Ah, that is a question for another day.”

“Okay, how do I get out of this cell?”

“Well, I do not recommend that you leave the cell, but if you do insist, you know the way.”

“I beg your pardon, but I don’t know the way out of this cell.”

“I assure you, you do. When there’s a will, there’s a way,” said the voice in a very singsong manner that deeply agitated Harry.

“I have searched this cell and there’s no door or window. Unless I am able to walk through this wall, there is not a way out of here.”

“Ah, Harry Potter, you are much smarter than you think.”

“What does that mean?”

There was no answer. Harry quickly became very angry as he waited for the effeminate voice to return. Slumping down in the middle of the floor, Harry became entrenched in his thoughts.

Tristram had said that if he willed it, there was a way out of the cell. Harry began thinking. Perhaps the way out was through the wall. Harry walked up to the closest wall, directly across from the cement bench. Placing his hands on the wall, he gave a light push, seeing if he could just walk through the barrier.

The wall did not give and Harry felt only the firm pressure of his hands against the wall. Harry stared at frosted pink glass.

“Oh, Harry? Are you still locked in your little pink cell?”

“Do you mind? I’m trying to get out of here.”

“Oh, no, I don’t mind at all. One would think that with such strong magical powers, you’d be out of that cell in a heartbeat.”

“Tristram?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“Shut it.”

“Very well, if you insist.”

Harry felt very alone again. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He had no idea where he was or how to get out of it. The headache beginning to build in his mind did nothing in the way of assistance. He began to think of what Hermione had said when they had been discussing magical theory. She had told him that a wand was not about the spell or the wand, but rather the will. This is why they had been able to practice the wandless magic without casting any signatures. Harry’s head snapped up as he thought of this.

Gathering his strength, Harry closed his eyes, focusing on the wall in front of him with his mind’s eye. He focused on the very intricate details of the wall, the way the grains of whatever material it was made of were laid. He focused on the grains separating, breaking apart. He pulled back farther and pictured a hole forming in the wall, a very tiny hole. He let the hole grow until it was large enough to put his hand through. He then expanded it, pushing the wall to its limit. Within seconds, the wall in Harry’s mind snapped, crumbling apart and falling at Harry’s feet.

Slowly, Harry moved his hand towards the wall, still picturing the crumbling in his mind. He gradually opened his mind and nearly lost his concentration due to his surprise. He saw the wall bending to his will. Reshaping itself. The hole formed and grew, stretching to its limits. Finally, the wall gave way and the pieces landed in a tumultuous heap at Harry’s feet.

“Are you proud of yourself Harry?”

“No. I still don’t know where I am.”

“And you won’t know either.”

“Could you at least tell me what I’m doing here?”

“I really couldn’t tell you. My lord will not allow it.”

“Ah, and who would that be?”

“Do you take me for a fool, you little brat?”

With the burst of anger from the disembodied voice, Harry felt the searing pain in his scar. He gasped and grabbed his forehead.

“Do not cross me, my boy.”

The final warning echoed in the desolate chamber and Harry again had the dreaded feeling of being completely alone. For the first time since he had willed himself out of the cell, Harry took a look at his surroundings. He was outside now, that much he could gather. The world was very weird to him. The sky was a deep purple, fading to black as sky met earth. The earth beneath him was blacker than the darkest night Harry had ever seen. The scatterings of trees he noticed had no leaves, but were only branches. The feeling of death pervading Harry’s body chilled him to the bone. The land he was in was without feeling, without life.

The flash nearly blinded Harry. He shielded his face against the burst of light. Instinctively, Harry reached for his wand and nearly cried out with relief that it was still tucked inside his robes.

“Your wand is useless here.”

Harry moved his arms to his side, staring at the figure before him. He’d recognized the voice instantly. Blinding terror swelled up inside him, but an even more powerful emotion surged through Harry. Boiling rage consumed him as he looked into the evil, snake-like eyes of his parents’ murderer, of Cedric’s murderer. The ugly face that made his toes curl grinned maliciously at him.

“Hello, Harry.”

“What am I doing here?”

“Harry. Harry. Harry. That’s no way to greet an elder,” shaking his head, Voldemort’s smile faded, “didn’t your parents teach you any manners?”

A white rage burned through Harry. He resisted the urge to lunge at Voldemort and instead turned a stony face to the creature before him.

Voldemort’s head cocked slightly to the side as he eyed Harry. “You are very strong; determined and powerful. You have a very sharp mind, though that blinding rage causes you to lose your wit. Rather unattractive really. You remind me so much of, well, me when I was your age.”

“We are nothing alike.”

“But don’t you see, Harry, how similar we are?”

Harry just stared straight ahead, focusing his eyes on a spot behind the dark wizard.

Voldemort frowned. “Will you not answer me?” Silence. “We aren’t here to play games, Harry. Answer me.” Again, silence. Voldemort’s eyes narrowed and there was

a swift flick of his wand.

Harry screamed as the familiar pain streaked through his body. The Cruciatus curse had become no less painful since he had endured it last. Harry doubled over in pain, his head lolling to the side. Gasping as he collected himself, he rolled his eyes up to look at Voldemort, the pain from the curse ebbing only slightly.

“Why don’t you just kill me?” he managed, his body still quaking with pain.

“I cannot kill you, not yet. You’re much more useful than I thought.”

“I doubt that. I could never be of any use to you.”

“Ah, but you are so very powerful. We could be great together. We could have the entire world grovelling at our feet.”

“I don’t believe you. You want me by your side because you believe that I’d be too dangerous against you,” Harry said quietly, an unknown bravery beginning to creep into his chest.

“I don’t fear you, if that’s what you’re implying.”

Harry, growing braver or perhaps just foolish, stood himself straight up. He had gained a few inches since his last meeting with the Dark Lord and was nearly eye-to-eye with the man-no, *snake* standing before him.

“But you do, I can sense it,” Harry challenged.

“These past years have not been wasted dabbling in trivial matters. I have spent the years of my plight to find out more about you. I know about your powers and the special gifts you have, things that you don’t even know about. You would be a great weapon in my arsenal. If you join me, I can teach you how to use your powers. Without me, you will be nothing.”

“With you, I will be nothing.”

Using the frustration and annoyance portrayed on Voldemort’s face to his advantage, Harry summoned all of the strength he was able to, playing a scene in his mind’s eye over and over again. With another burst of light, this time from Harry’s outstretched hand, the Dark wizard flew backwards into the side of the cell that Harry had previously occupied. Hearing a sickening crack, he began running, running away from the cell and the field it was in. He ran and ran, until the stabbing in his side became no more than a ghost of a feeling. He did not know where he was going or where he was, but he knew it was foolish to continue running. Stopping, he collapsed on the warped ground. He was mentally and physically exhausted. To his left, he noticed a small sign. The wooden post it was nailed to looked rotted and the sign did not seem to be in any better of a condition. He crawled to it, hoping for some sort of clue. However, the sign only puzzled Harry more deeply. The words were a complete jumble. He squinted his eyes and still nothing. Suddenly, his world shook.

The sign crumbled and his vision wavered.

“Harry! Harry! Wake up!”

Harry opened his eyes. He was back in his room on Privet Drive, with the moon shining down from his ceiling. Hermione was sitting next to him, shaking him wildly. He noticed the look of horror on her face and grasped her hand.

“Harry, are you ok?”

“Hermione...” Harry trailed off and hugged her. She did not respond for a moment before returning the hug.

“What happened?”

Harry pulled himself into a sitting position. She looked at him anxiously. He explained his entire dream to her. Her looks ranged from sadness to anger to righteous indignation. She gasped at all the right places and held his hand the entire time. When he had finished, she looked at him in shocked silence.

“Harry, we should write to Dumbledore immediately. In the morning, we’ll go into the library and see if there’s anything in there about dreams.”

He laughed and kissed her on the forehead.

“That’s my Mione alright, when in doubt, hit the books.”

“Harry Potter, I believe that my research has saved your arse on more than one occasion,” she scolded him, but her anger lost its affect with the smile plastered across her face.

He smiled thankfully at her, very glad that she woke him up from his nightmare. She smiled back at him and walked to his desk. Taking out a parchment and quill, Hermione scripted a quick letter to Dumbledore with a description of Harry’s nightmare. She walked to Hedwig and tied the letter to her leg.

“There, all taken care of. I’m sure that Dumbledore will know what to do. It’ll be alright Harry, don’t worry.”

Grasping her hand, “Hermione, I’m so glad you’re here. I’m not sure what I would do without you.”

“Harry, I’ll always be here for you, no matter what.”

Harry sighed inwardly. Ginny had said the same thing to him a few weeks before. He smiled to himself at the thought of Ginny. He was gradually going used to the idea of

wanting to be with her and wanting to hold her and at the moment, he wanted to be with her now more than he ever had. His thoughts had wandered farther onto the topic of Ginny when he heard Hermione sigh.

“Hermione? Is everything ok?”

“Yeah, I just miss Ron.”

“Oh,” Harry’s heart constricted when she said this. He was so confused. Harry genuinely liked Ginny. She was such a good friend to him, even when they hardly knew each other. There was something about her that made him trust her immediately, something in her smile and the way she looked at him. She was different than Hermione. She was wonderful and interesting and he wanted to know her better, but Hermione was a completely different story. She was a part of him. Often times, he felt like only Hermione truly understood him. However, Hermione had Ron. She’d been practically in love with Ron for what felt like years. Harry was actually thrilled that they were finally getting together after all the struggle of last year. However, he was more than a little worried that things would change between the three friends, maybe even for the worst.

The next morning Harry awoke to a flutter of wings. There were no less five owls in his room, perched on the desk, bookcase, window seat and night table, awaiting Harry. He sat up and Pig immediately flew to him, bearing two cards and a small package. What Harry recognized as Percy’s owl, Hermes, flew over bearing another, larger package, and a cake box. An unfamiliar brown owl dropped a brown package tied with a grubby string. An eagle owl dropped a parchment envelope that bounced off of Hermione’s head, waking her as two more owls dropped additional parcels or letters on top of the others.

In an instant they were gone.

“Harry, does this happen every birthday?”

“Usually, although sometimes they do come in the middle of the night.”

Harry picked up the parcel dropped by Pig. There was a card from Ginny and Ron and a small package from Ron. Harry picked up the package and ripped open the packaging. It was a book entitled *He Flew Like a Madman*, about a famous Quidditch player. Ron also bought Harry a wizard’s chess set with an enclosed note (“You’ve time to practice before you come to the Burrow. You should play much better by then.”). Ginny had sent Harry a wizard’s camera and Mrs. Weasley had enclosed a small package of fudge. The grubby package was from Hagrid, which contained a small Wizard Wireless receiver. Sirius had sent Harry a package of silver Gobstones and a book on duelling.

When Harry came to the last two packages, he was surprised to see that one was a copy of the Daily Prophet. The second was a letter from Hogwarts.

“Harry, don’t open your letter yet. Wait until I get mine.”

“When do you usually get yours?”

“On July 31st, but it may be delayed this year.”

Harry tossed the parcel from Hogwarts and the copy of the Daily Prophet onto his desk and let Hermione lead him downstairs. When they reached the kitchen, Harry was surprised to find it completely empty. Arabella was nowhere to be found. There was no evidence that any breakfast had been made and Harry couldn’t even feel the presence of his aunt. He turned to Hermione, expecting to see her worried and instead found her grinning cheekily at him. As if on cue, Harry heard a small bark and turned to the entrance of the kitchen.

Arabella was standing there holding a little jack Russell terrier. The puppy was wiggling about in her arms as Arabella stood there smiling at him. She set the dog down, who dashed to Harry, jumping all over his legs and wagging her tail furiously. Harry bent down to pick her up and she joyfully licked his face.

“What kind of dog is she?”

“Well, she’s not completely a dog. She’s half crup.”

Harry vaguely recognized the name, but still looked at Hermione for a further explanation.

“A crup is just like a jack Russell terrier, except for two key differences. The first is the tail and the second is the fact that they hate muggles.”

“Isn’t that kind of a dangerous pet to have in a muggle neighbourhood?”

“Not necessarily. She’s still a puppy and a half-breed at that, so she’s still very gentle and by the time she would start to get, um, moody, we’ll be back at Hogwarts.”

Harry looked down at the giddy puppy. She had jumped out of his arms during the brief exchange with Hermione and was now battling ferociously with a piece of paper found under the kitchen table. He noticed her forked tail, which Hermione had mentioned. Still curious about the small animal, Harry bent down to get a closer look. She noticed him immediately and leapt at him with all her strength. Harry fell to the ground in a fit of giggles as the dog jumped on him, covering his face with kisses.

“What shall we name her?” Harry managed.

“I have no idea.”

Harry stood up then and brushed himself off, looking at Arabella.

“I had a niece named Daryl. It means beloved,” she said.

“Hmm... Daryl. I like it. What do you think of it?” Harry asked the puppy.

Harry, Hermione and Arabella decided that the tiny bark and high jump was enough indication. Arabella picked up the small purple collar that Hermione had brought down from Harry’s stacks of gifts. With a quick flick of her wand, the name was scripted on to the small gold tag dangling merrily from the collar. Harry fastened the collar onto to Daryl, who emitted another happy bark.

Just as Hermione’s letter from Hogwarts arrived, the front doorbell rang. Harry, Hermione and Arabella jumped and all looked at each other. They had been sitting in the living room playing with the new puppy when a large owl had swooped in. Just as it landed, the doorbell rang, breaking the silence of the household and they all became dead quiet, even Daryl. Arabella motioned to Harry to return to his seat and went to the hallway to answer the door.

“Hello Arabella!”

“Hi!”

“So where’s the party?”

“Where’s Harry?”

At the same time, Harry and Hermione jumped off of the couch. They had both recognized the voice of Ron and ran to the door.

Ron, Ginny and the twins stood grinning at the door. Arabella looked utterly flabbergasted by the surprise quests. Suddenly, chaos erupted.

Daryl sprinted happily into the room as Chief Pip stormed down the stairs. Hermione had flung herself at Ron in order to get out of the bear’s way, which was running to and fro, brandishing a miniature nightstick. Several well-landed blows had Ginny hopping on one foot, holding her ankle, George clutching his knee and Daryl sitting in the corner whimpering. Harry snatched the bear under his arms.

“I say! What is the meaning of this? Unhand me, you rogue! Put me down!”

“What are you doing?”

“We were being attacked sir.”

“Chief, these are my friends. This is Ginny, Ron, and Fred. George is the bloke clutching his knee. They’re not attacking the house, I promise.”

“If you insist, Harry Potter.”

Harry set the bear back on the ground. Pip retreated a few steps and stared at the

Weasleys menacingly.

“Harry, what on earth is that?!” exclaimed Ron.

“That is Chief Pip, a gift from Hermione.”

“Hermione, why in the bloody hell would you buy something like that?!”

“Oh, Ron, calm down. He’s just a teddy bear. Really, he’s nothing to worry about.”

“Nothing to worry about? I believe that a miniature nightstick is most definitely a sort of weapon.”

Hermione just shook her head at him, chuckling to herself. A rather indignant squawk sounded from the living room. Hermione clapped herself on the head.

“Oh my letter! I’d forgotten all about it!”

They all dashed into the living room. Hermione was clutching a package from Hogwarts, nearly identical to Harry’s. She looked rather nervous about the whole situation. Calmly, Harry led everyone up to his room.

“Has everyone received their letters?”

The Weasleys all nodded and pulled theirs from their cloaks.

“Have you read them yet?”

“No, we were waiting to open them with you and Hermione; thought it might be less scary.”

Harry just nodded and picked his package off of the desk.

Ginny gave everyone an encouraging smile and they all tore into their various parcels. Hermione had gotten hers opened the fastest and emitted a shriek of delight. Ginny squealed and began blushing furiously. Nearly in unison, Ron and the twins offered up rather stormy looking glances at the two girls, before turning expectantly to Harry.

The poker face they saw revealed nothing. He looked at Hermione, who watched him for a few moments before emitting another squeal and zipping across the room to hug him. Hermione kissed Harry on the cheek.

“I knew you could do it! What does your letter say?”

However, before Harry could answer, he noticed the equally angry looks from Ron and Ginny. He quickly separated himself from Hermione.

“So, what does everyone’s letter say?”

“Mine says that I have an MQ of 161. It says that though the score is above average, I

was not in the top 10 in the school. Therefore, I did not get into the program. The letter goes on to list the prefects for this school year and the supplies that I will need,” Ron offered up, looking stonily at Harry.

“I have an MQ of 139,” George added.

“Mine is 138,” answered Fred.

“As tested as having an MQ of 192, I have been accepted into the Hogwarts School of Intensive Magical Studies,” muttered Ginny, looking rather sheepishly at her brothers.

“I tested at 263. Also accepted and made a prefect,” whispered Hermione.

They all turned to Harry, who was still staring at his letter. Ginny crept forward and plucked it from his hands. She unwrinkled it and grinned cheekily at him before opening the piece of parchment, still expecting Harry to make a grab for the letter. Harry, however, was standing stalk-still, staring at her with a look of abject horror on his face. Giving him an odd-like, Ginny turned back to the parchment in her hands.

She perused the letter before letting it drop to the floor.

“Harry, that just can’t be. How is that possible?”

“I’m not sure,” Harry looked at Ginny, who could not hide the utter surprise in her eyes.

Ron playfully smacked Harry on the shoulder, “What did you get? A 64?”

“Ron! Harry would never score that low!”

“Gosh, Gin, I was just kidding. What did he get then?”

“Well, his letter says that he tested at an MQ level of 426. That’s, theoretically, a magus level MQ.”

The entire room became as quiet as a tomb. Ron stared angrily at Harry, turning twelve different shades of red in the process. He flung his letter to the floor before storming out. They listened as he bolted down the steps and slammed the front door.

Hermione took one look at Harry before turning and following after Ron. George and Fred stared at Harry. There were a few minutes of silence before Fred cleared his throat, “Magus level, that’s pretty cool, Harry. Don’t worry about Ron. I’m sure he’ll get over it.”

“I doubt that,” Harry said quietly, looking at the floor. Ginny motioned to Fred and George, who quickly made excuses to be elsewhere.

Once they had left, Ginny grasped Harry’s hand and led him to sit on the bed.

“Harry, are you okay?”

“Gin, how would you be right now if your best friend was never going to speak to you again and your other best friend just ran after him?”

“I imagine that I’d be pretty upset.”

“Yes, well...um, Ginny, where did my letter go?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, here,” she handed over the letter to Harry.

“Well, I’m a prefect. I guess that’s more ammunition for Ron. Oh and what’s this other letter? Hmm. Well, it looks like the Underage Wizarding Law has been revoked. Brilliant, another chance for Harry Potter to use his super powers.”

“Harry, what did you just say?”

“Super Powers? Cape? You know, comic books and lunch boxes?”

“No, no. The Underage Wizarding Law has been revoked?”

“Oh, yes, that. Well, by the looks of this letter, I would say so. I think there’s a Daily Prophet over on the desk. There’s more than likely an article about it in there.”

Ginny walked across the room to the desk and picked up the paper.

UNDERAGE WIZARDING LAW REVOKED

Today, July 31st, the Ministry of Magic has announced that they will be revoking the Underage Wizarding Laws. Affective immediately, it is no longer illegal for witches and wizards under the age of seventeen to use magic when away from school. The Ministry did not cite specific reasons for this unprecedented development, but rather Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge was quoted as saying “During this ago of uncertainty, it is necessary that all magic people be perfectly capable of using their magic, should the need arise.”

The ruling shocked many adult wizards and witches, who claimed that such a revocation of the law would create problems among young wizards and witches. Gangs and illegal duelling clubs are just a few of the complaints made by parents throughout Britain.

Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore refused to comment, but this reporter believes that this new development comes in the wake of the newly resurfaced You-Know-Who rumours. Though the Magic of Ministry firmly denies that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has risen, shortly after the end of spring term at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, parents began owling the Daily Prophet with rumours about You-Know-Who, which were allegedly started by Headmaster Dumbledore.

Ginny looked at Harry in shock. He took the paper from her and read the article splashed across the front page. After reading it, he simply smiled at her and picked up his wand. He banished the paper to the desk.

“Harry! Don’t--”

“Gin, relax, it’s not illegal anymore. Here, watch.”

With that said, Harry began magicking items around the room. He sprouted a bouquet of magical flowers for Ginny from the tip of his wand. He summoned items from his desk and banished things out into the hallway. Upon, hearing the noise, Chief Pip tore into the room.

“Harry Potter! What’s going on?”

“Oh, we’re just playing around a bit, Chief Pip,” Harry said, levitating the small bear around the room. Daryl had followed Pip in and was delighted when Harry magicked some dog biscuits out of thin air for her.

“Harry Potter! Put me down!”

“Oh, Pip! Pipe down!” Harry chortled, landing Pip across the room on top of the bookshelf. The small bear looked daggers at Harry, followed by menacing looks at Daryl who was happily barking at Pip from her spot on the floor.

Ginny laughed at this and walked to Harry. She slid her arms around Harry’s neck and hugged him tightly.

“Are you feeling better Harry?”

As an answer, Harry leaned down and kissed her softly on the lips.

“Thanks, Gin.”

Ginny reached for Harry’s hand and they headed downstairs. Before they reached the bottom of the stairs, Harry heard two very distinctive voices shouting at each other.

“Ron, you need to grow up! Who cares if Harry has more magical capability than you? Don’t you realize that it just doesn’t matter?”

“That’s the thing, Hermione, it does matter! Maybe not to you, you’re the smartest witch, I know. But to me, it matters. It’s not fair. Harry is the Quidditch star, Harry is the prefect, and Harry is the super hero. What about me?”

“Ron! Everything isn’t about you! Did it ever occur to you that Harry never picked this? He never wanted to be a magus or a prefect! It’s just how the cards were dealt.”

“Harry gets everything Hermione! Everything always works out for him. I’m surprised he hasn’t gone after you, yet. You two would be oh-so-perfect together. The perfect little witch and wizard couple. You could go off and defeat all the evil in the

world and then go and make lots of little super babies.”

Harry winced, as he knew what was coming. He heard the smacking sound resonating throughout the house. Ginny grimaced next to him as they peered through the door to the kitchen.

“Sod off, Ronald Weasley! How dare you say such a thing to me!”

“Well, it’s true Hermione! You’d be so sodding perfect for each other. He’s just your type. Smart, nerdy, and powerful. Why aren’t you just falling all over yourself in love with him?” Ron spat at her.

“Because, I’m not.”

“Why, not? Too good even for Harry Potter? What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing, Ron. Absolutely nothing is wrong with Harry. He is perfect. But I’m not in love with him.”

“And why the bloody hell not?”

Hermione’s anger was obviously at the boiling point. Her brown eyes were flashing dangerously. Ron noticed this and took a tiny step closer to her. He cocked his eyebrow at her. This was the point that drove it home for Hermione.

“Because, I, Ronald Weasley, am in love with you, you great prat!” she screamed at him.

Whatever Ron had been expecting, it had not been this. His face softened as Hermione burst into tears. He pulled her to him tentatively, either afraid to break her or afraid she’d pummel him.

“Hermione, shhh... I’m sorry. I am, I’m so sorry.”

“I am too, Ron. I know you’re upset and it wasn’t fair of me to yell at you like that,” she managed between sobs.

“Hermione?”

“Yes?”

“Did you mean it?”

“Of course. Ron, I do love you.”

“I love you, too. My Hermione,” he smiled down at her, before gathering her too him and kissing her fully on the lips. At first, she didn’t respond, but she softened into his kiss and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Harry felt a light nudge in his side. He turned to Ginny, “Harry, I think we should

give them their privacy.”

He nodded silently and followed as she led him back to his room. Harry was glad for his friends, but a part of him, albeit a small part, was hurt by the prospect of Hermione being with Ron. Harry vowed not to let it bother him and turned his attention fully to Ginny, who wanted to discuss the supplies they’d need for the new program.

Later that night, the rest of the Weasley family turned up. Arabella had made Harry a huge dinner for his birthday. She had made spaghetti, complete with garlic bread and a huge salad with vegetables from his aunt’s garden. There was a massive birthday cake, with ‘Happy Birthday Harry’ scrawled across it in green icing. They all sat at the table to talk after the dishes had been cleared. Eventually, the entire party moved into the living room for various games and conversation. In between games of Exploding Snap, Ron tapped Harry on the shoulder.

“Err. Harry, do you think I could talk to you outside?”

Without a word, Harry followed Ron into the backyard. They sat down on one of the benches.

“I’m, err, sorry about earlier. I made a big deal out of nothing.”

Harry wasn’t sure how to respond. He wanted to forgive Ron, but a part of him hesitated. It had hugely unfair of Ron to snap like that. Nothing that ever happened to Harry was Harry’s fault, yet Ron, who was supposed to be his best friend, had completely lost it. Harry said so to Ron, who obligingly apologized.

After a few more minutes of talking, Harry accepted Ron’s apology and Ron smiled gratefully at him. Harry smiled back and after an awkward silence, they headed back into the house.

Ginny and Hermione were sitting next to each other on the couch in a fit of giggles. After they had all discussed the underage wizarding law at dinner, Hermione and Ginny had taken to using magic whenever possible. They were currently hiding tiny trinkets around the room, using their wands and various hiding spells. Daryl and Chief Pip would sit anxiously in front of them, awaiting the signal. When given the go-head, they would run off in opposite directions looking for the objects. Harry laughed at the small dog, who time and again, would find the object before the teddy bear.

After the Weasleys had left, Hermione, Arabella and Harry sat talking quietly in the living room. Arabella had brought one of her cats from home and sat lovingly stoking its soft fur as Harry petted Daryl, who was sprawled out on the floor.

Hermione sighed audibly at the sight of the kind witch and her cat. “I miss Crookshanks.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s having a fine time at the Weasleys dear. There’s nothing to worry

about.”

“I know, but I still miss him.”

Arabella asked Hermione some more questions about her beloved cat before Harry stood up, yawning and stretching.

“I think I’ll head to bed. Goodnight Arabella. Goodnight Hermione. Thanks for such a great birthday.”

He nodded to both of them before giving a brief whistle. Daryl stood up from her place on the floor. Chief Pip stood as well, having been stripped of his pillow and they all trudged up the stairs.

Harry lit his wand, when he entered his room, preferring the dim light. He noticed a rather large box sitting on the bed and walked over to it.

Harry,

I could not buy you a present this year, as you may have well imagined. However, I think this could be better than any present that I could ever buy you. Happy Birthday.

A.

Harry smiled to himself as he opened the box, but suddenly his heart skipped a beat. The first thing that he saw was a long list on an old piece of parchment. He name was scrawled at the top in a hand that Harry recognized as his mum’s. Upon reading it, Harry quickly realized what it was. Ron had told him a few years ago about the Cérémonie De Cadeau performed by wizarding families at the birth of their children. Ron had told him that every Weasley had a list of the gifts for them from other wizards and witches at their births. Each witch or wizard invited to the ceremony would give a small part of themselves to the baby. Usually they gave a piece of themselves that represented something they treasured. The transferring of a part of one’s self to a new baby was a great and powerful gift. Harry perused the list for familiar names. He found many.

Sirius Black- Mischievousness

Remus Lupin- Curiosity

Albus Dumbledore- Wit and Humour

Peter Pettigrew- Forgiveness

Rachel Granger- Intelligence

Richard Granger- Loyalty

Minerva McGonagall- Perseverance

Rubeus Hagrid- Compassion

Severus Snape- Integrity

Molly Weasley- Luck

Arthur Weasley- Intuition

Amarante Evans- Love

And so the list went on and on. He recognized many of the names on the list and was surprised at how many people had attended. Harry set the book aside and began to

shuffle through the contents of the box.

He found numerous photo albums and a baby book. He laughed at some of the pictures and nearly cried at the others. After what felt like hours, Harry heard a soft knock on his bedroom door.

“Come in, Hermione.”

Harry had known it was her, but truthfully had not expected to see her. He turned to her with a concerned look on his face.

“Don’t worry, I haven’t had any nightmares yet. I just wanted to come in and talk to you for awhile.”

Without answering, he moved over on the bed so that she could sit with him.

“Dumbledore responded to my owl. He said that you should write down what happens in your dreams. He also said that if one happens again that is like this first one, you should owl him immediately. He doesn’t seem too worried though.”

“That’s good,” he responded absentmindedly, still looking at the photo album.

Harry looked at Hermione and watched her eyes that looked as if they were involved in some sort of internal struggle.

“Is there anything else you wanted to talk about, Mione?”

Hermione looked at him and took a deep breath. “Harry, I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to come in here at night anymore. Ron would kill me if he found out. He wouldn’t understand.”

Harry privately agreed with her, but did not say anything. He felt that this was not a time when he should really say much of anything. Hermione obviously had something on her mind and wanted Harry to listen to her.

“Harry, did you overhear my argument with Ron this afternoon?”

“I may have heard bits and pieces.”

“Well, he said some pretty horrible stuff about you.”

“Yeah, I heard. Don’t worry Hermione, I’m not upset or anything.”

“Thank Merlin for that, but that isn’t what I wanted to ask you about. We’ve just grown really close this summer and I wanted to make sure you were okay with anything happening between Ron and me.”

Harry looked at her, “Well, I’m just a little worried that this is going to somehow strain the friendship between the three of us.”

“I don’t know, Harry. I can’t promise anything. I hope it doesn’t change the three of us.”

“I think it will, Mione.”

“I know,” she said softly, bringing her knees up under her chin. After a few minutes of silence, she turned to look at him, “Harry, thank you for being such a good friend.”

“Mione, you don’t have to thank me.”

She smiled and hugged him. Turning, Hermione noticed all of the albums spread across the bed.

“Harry, what is all this?”

“These are albums from my parents. My gift list is here somewhere. There’s a baby book and my first pair of shoes. I think some of this stuff is also what my aunt has saved over the years.”

“Wow, I didn’t think she would have saved anything from when you were a baby.”

“Yeah, well, see this painting right here?”

“Harry, I don’t believe you can call that a painting, it’s more of a large blob with multicoloured paint.”

“Just semantic, but there’s no way I could have done this when my parents were still alive. It looks like from when I was in primary school.”

Hermione nodded and picked up Harry’s gift list.

“Harry, you got so many wonderful gifts. I can’t believe my parents were there. It must have been right before I was born. I wish that I had a gift list like this.”

“Maybe you do. Perhaps your mum and dad made one for you.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen one.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have. It’s not like muggles have Cérémonies De Cadeau.”

Hermione just studied him silently and he noticed her eyes staring directly into his, as if looking for some reaction. He wondered what his eyes betrayed and whether or not she could tell that he was exhilarated, overwhelmed, exhausted and sad all at the same time. Hermione gave him a light smile before leaning over and giving him a small kiss on the cheek.

“Well, I think I’ll leave you alone to enjoy this. I’m tired anyway. Sleep well, Harry. Happy Birthday.”

“Good night Hermione,” Harry whispered as she walked out of the room.

Chapter Five: The Race

Harry stood in the middle of his room, looking back and forth, obviously searching for something. He could have sworn that he had left his wand right on the desk. Harry brought his gaze back to the centre of the room. Slowly, he let his eyes roam across the room, searching every visible crevice. He noticed a faint glimmer from the corner of the room where Daryl's bed was. He walked over and his wand was in fact hidden under a blanket and some toys. Looking suspiciously around, he was unable to locate either his puppy or the teddy bear that Hermione had gotten him for his birthday.

Shaking his head at the thought of the two off torturing some neighbourhood cat, Harry shrunk the dog's bed with his wand and put it into his trunk. He did the same with his cauldron, robes, some textbooks, a few of his Quidditch books, his broom, his left over potion kit and the rest of the dog belongings. Hermione and Harry would be leaving for Diagon Alley in half an hour and he had just started packing.

He finished quickly however and checked his room one last time for any forgotten articles. Finding none, he let out a sharp whistle. He heard a small bark in the yard outside his window and within a minute, Daryl was running at full speed into Harry's room, with Chief Pip at her heels.

Harry looked at the two. They were both covered in dirt and at least Pip had the decency to look rather sheepish. Muttering a quick cleaning spell, Harry picked up Pip.

"Pip, I'm thinking that it will be a good idea for you to go into the trunk, at least until we get to the Burrow."

"But Harry Potter! Why can't I go into the carrier with Daryl?"

"Not today. Sorry. You'll only be in there for a few minutes, I promise."

The bear looked greatly saddened at the prospect of going into Harry's trunk. He brightened however as Hermione entered the room.

"Are you finished packing yet?"

"Yep. Pip's angry with me."

"Pip, why are you angry with Harry?"

"Miss, Harry Potter is going to put me into his trunk."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. It's nice and roomy in there."

Pip looked at her with what would have been a disgusted look on his face, had his eyes not been full of admiration.

Harry laughed immediately when he noticed the look on the teddy bear's face. He quickly scooped up the bear and set him into the trunk, despite the protests. Hermione laughed and patted the small bear on the head as Harry shut the lid of his trunk, making sure to leave breathing holes in the lid. With a whistle, Daryl had run into the carrier Harry had purchased for her. He stacked the carrier and Hedwig's cage onto the trunk and levitated everything downstairs.

Hermione's things were already waiting in front of the fireplace. Arabella had the fireplace temporarily hooked up to the Floo Network so that they could get to Diagon Alley.

"Ok, remember now, say 'Diagon Alley' nice and clear," Arabella warned them.

Harry nearly laughed out loud. He most certainly did not want to end up in Knockturn Alley again. Hermione stepped through the fireplace first and Harry followed as soon as she had disappeared.

He held his breath and tucked in his arms as he felt the familiar but sickening swirling. He opened an eye and saw other fireplaces rushing by. Quickly, he scrunched his eyes tight again and soon felt himself tumble into the fireplace at the Leaky Cauldron.

Hermione was waiting for him. She had already dusted herself off and smiled as he opened his eyes.

"Oh, Harry," she laughed as she took off his glasses and performed a cleaning spell. He thanked her just as the fireplace behind them flared out and Ron and Ginny stepped out.

"Harry!" Ginny immediately rushed to Harry and wrapped him in a hug. Hermione was plastering Ron's face in kisses as he turned several shades of red. After the greetings, they all trudged upstairs to their rented rooms. They were staying in ordinary rooms this trip since they would only be staying the night. Ron and Harry helped the girls with their trunks before settling into their own room.

"So Harry what do you have to buy?"

"Well, there are a lot of books we have to buy. I need new robes, a new cauldron, an entirely different potion supplies kit, a new set of dress robes, a new cloak, an apparition charm, new quills and parchment, oh and of course, a birthday present for Hermione."

At this, Ron looked shocked and then embarrassed. Harry laughed, "Ron, do you want to get Hermione a joint gift?"

"Shouldn't I get her something by myself, since I'm her boyfriend?"

"Well, yes, but this way you can get her something little from yourself."

Ron quickly saw the logic and he and Harry headed downstairs to meet the girls.

Harry squinted as they walked into the courtyard outside of the Leaky Cauldron. The bright summer sun was warming but Harry couldn't see anything beyond a few feet in front of him.

They headed to Gringotts first, where Hermione exchanged money and Harry and the Weasleys headed to their vaults.

After Gringotts, Hermione insisted that they get their books first.

“How many books are on the list for the intensive program?”

“Nearly thirty, it seems that for this program they expect us to have a small library at our disposal.”

Ron gaped at the list Hermione handed him and turned to Ginny, “But Ginny, how are you going to get all of these books?”

“I already have a few, but not that it matters as the program is done completely through a scholarship fund.”

Ron just nodded and looked again at his list of six or so books. The children came upon Flourish and Blotts and headed inside to wade through the shelves of books.

When they emerged from the stacks of books a few hours later, everyone except Ron was laden with heavy books. Harry, Hermione and Ginny struggled to the counter and the owner of the bookstore gave them appraising looks.

“So, you three must be in that new Hogwarts program. I’ve already had a few of your friends in here getting their books as well. I’ll need your names then.”

The three students volunteered the necessary information as Ron watched them. The owner checked off their names and books on a sheet of parchment and began bagging all of their textbooks. This process took the better part of an hour and Ron went through the checkout process in under five minutes.

As they left Flourish and Blotts, Ron was laughing fit to burst at all of the books that Harry, Hermione and Ginny were struggling with. Despite the use of levitation charms, they still had a number of cumbersome bags that were difficult to handle.

Hermione stared huffily at Ron before levitating one of her heavier bags right into Ron’s arms. Ron buckled under the weight and crashed to the ground. Hermione’s books flew all over the cobblestone sidewalk.

Despite his friend’s precarious situation, Harry burst out laughing. Hermione and Ginny, both furious at Ron’s rudeness dumped the rest of their tomes by Ron’s feet and stalked off.

Harry reached a hand down to Ron, "Come on, get up. We can take all of these books back to the Leaky Cauldron and then get Hermione's birthday present."

"Sounds like a plan."

The boys trudged up the street, now bearing the loads of their books as well as those of Ginny and Hermione. After dropping off the books, they headed back to Diagon Alley.

"What should we get her?" asked Ron.

"How should I know? You're her boyfriend."

"Yeah, well, you lived with her all summer. What about a book?"

"Which one? She just got thirty new books, I'm sure she'll need some time to read those. Besides, I think she'll need a break from all the books this year."

"What about some sort of game?"

"I don't think so. How about a broom?" suggested Harry.

"She hates to fly!"

"Yeah, but it could come in handy. Besides, she hasn't flown all that much. Perhaps with a slower broom, she could learn to like it."

"Well, why don't we go look? It's the best idea you've had all day."

"Well, it's better than a book."

"Shut it. So, do you think she'll want a Tornado XE?"

"Ron, why on earth would Hermione need the world's fastest racing broom?"

"So she could race you."

"I think that's a horrible idea. How about a nice Cleansweep?"

"Now that's a horrible idea! Do you want her to sweep with the broom or fly it?"

Harry gave Ron a mock-disgusted look as they arrived at Quality Quidditch Supplies.

The reaction from the boys upon entering the revered shop was standard. Discussion ceased and they both stared open-mouthed around the store. The far wall was lined with broomsticks. Wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling. Broomsticks of every make and model glistened under the bright lights. Immediately near the door was a vast array of items. Harry noticed pads, sets of Quidditch balls, beater bats, broom polish, twig clippers, cushioning charms, all-weather Quidditch gear, and other

paraphernalia. Harry and Ron quickly made their way to the back of the store. Centred on the wall, given ample berth from the other brooms was the brand-new top of the line Tornado XE. The broom was sleeker than Harry's. It had a dark handle and straighter than straight twigs. Harry gently laid a hand on the broom handle, but quickly drew it away when the slight tingle of magic entered his fingers. Ron's eyes glazed over as he reached out hand. He too touched his hand to the broom and was evidently shocked by its power.

Harry recovered from the broom hypnosis first. He shook his head and pulled Ron farther down the wall. They perused the rows of brooms before Harry picked up a Comet 260.

"Ron, how about this? It's not too fast, but it's decent enough that she could have some fun with it."

"Comets are easy to control, it's a good broom for a girl too."

Harry looked at Ron questioningly.

"Well, it's the truth. Comets are definitely a girly broom," Ron said with an indignant air.

Harry just shook his head, "Does this have something to do with the fact that Malfoy owned one first year?"

"Well, Malfoy is rather prissy."

Harry just looked at Ron, trying to puzzle out his best friend. Shrugging inwardly, Harry sighed and picked up the Comet 260. He appraised the broom and looked at the tag. It was on sale and the price was fair besides. He quickly took the broom to the counter in the centre of the store.

When Harry and Ron emerged from QQS, they were empty-handed. The broom would be arriving at Hogwarts on Hermione's birthday.

The two boys headed down Diagon Alley towards the Leaky Caldron, hoping to run into Ginny and Hermione. They stopped briefly on the street in front of Madam Malkin's to chat with a Ravenclaw that Harry knew.

Suddenly, Ron was tugging at Harry's shirt and pointing into Madam Malkin's. Harry, irritated, spun around to peer into the windows and nearly fell over at the sight that met his eyes.

Hermione and Ginny were inside, flouncing about in very expensive and lavish looking dress robes. Harry and Ron gaped at them for a few moments before heading into the shop themselves.

"Oh Ginny, what a beautiful colour on you!" Exclaimed Hermione as Ginny sauntered out of the dressing room in a silvery, shimmering dress robe. It was a

sleeveless number with a low-cut neckline and slit up the thigh. The straight line of the gown fitted Ginny's slender and tall form.

Harry thought Hermione looked amazing as well. She was wearing a strapless midnight gown that had a tight fitting bodice with a flowing, full skirt. It was made of a material that Harry had never seen the likes of before. Like water, the midnight blue gown billowed and swayed as Hermione moved. The strange material was imbued with a silver shimmer that caught the light and accented the shape of the dress beautifully. Hermione turned towards them, not at all surprised to see them standing there. She grinned as she caught Harry's eye and he returned the grin as his eyes ran down her dress. She noticed this and blushed slightly. He quickly closed the gap between them under the presumption that he was wiping something off of her shoulder. His heart raced as he touched her soft, cool skin.

"Hermione, you look beautiful," Harry breathed near her ear. She bowed her head and turned as Ron walked to them, quickly enveloping her in a hug. She looped her arms around his neck and beamed at him.

"Hermione! You look incredible! Gin, you look good too!" Ron exclaimed.

Harry nodded his agreement as Ginny moved to stand next to him. She placed her hand protectively on his arm as he once again focused on Hermione.

Madam Malkin bustled over to them.

"So ladies, what do you think?"

"I'll take it!" Hermione exclaimed, looking at Ginny excitedly. However, Ginny's euphoria lessened greatly at this statement. Hermione noticed and turned back to Madam Malkin.

"I'll take both. And may we begin trying on our school robes now?"

The witch nodded and hurried back to wherever she had come from. Hermione and Ginny disappeared into the dressing rooms and appeared a few minutes later clutching their new possessions. They headed towards the section of the store where the school robes were located. Everyone needed new robes and began trying them on.

About an hour later, the four students were laden with new school robes, as well as the girls' dresses and new dress robes for both Harry and Ron.

They continued through Diagon Alley stopping for their other necessary school supplies. Hermione and Harry headed to Magical Menagerie and Eeylop's Owl Emporium as Ginny and Ron returned to the Leaky Cauldron.

"Hermione, you looked amazing in that dress," Harry said as he and Hermione browsed through the owls. Hermione was looking for a smaller owl that she could use for post. Harry had accompanied her so that he could buy some food and treats for Hedwig.

“Thank you, Harry. I must say, you looked quite dashing in your dress robes as well. The dark silver contrasted beautifully with your eyes.”

“Thanks. Hermione, what about this owl?” he asked, pointing to a medium sized, tawny coloured owl. His dark eyes looked out from the cage and Harry found himself staring at them. The eyes had a calming power and seemed vaguely familiar to him. Hermione looked over the owl and instantly fell in love with the bird.

They exited the two magical creature shops, Hermione with her new owl, whom she had named Wilbur (“I wanted to be silly.”), and Harry with supplies for Daryl and Hedwig. When they returned to the Leaky Cauldron, Ron and Ginny were waiting in the dining room and dinner was about to be served.

After a satisfying dinner and friendly banter, the exhausted wizards and witches retired to their separate rooms for the evening. Tomorrow they would all be returning to the Burrow for a week before fall term began.

Harry was the last to travel by Floo to the Burrow. He arrived in the Weasley family kitchen and was not surprised by the hustle and bustle accompanied by the high volume in the very comfortable room.

Ginny and Hermione were standing in the midst of their purchases, having stopped to show Molly Weasley their new formal wear. She fussed over the low-cut dresses, the long slit in Ginny’s and the lack of straps on Hermione’s. Harry noticed that she did this all with a glint in her eye and a wide grin plastered on her face. She quickly gave up the motherly hen act and became rather giggly and excited over the new gowns.

Harry rolled his eyes at the fawning women and flicked his attention to Ron, who was strategizing on the carrying of his various supplies up several flights of stairs. Harry laughed at this and with a few flicks of his wand, had miniaturized all of his possessions, along with Ron’s and was carrying two miniature trunks up to Ron’s room.

Once the trunks had been returned to normal size, the young men began sorting through their belongings. Harry noticed the superfluous amount of purchases Ron had made.

“Ron, did you make some extra money over the holidays?” Harry questioned with as much tact as he could muster.

The question didn’t faze Ron in the least. “Well, Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes took in a lot of customers this summer, so George and Fred paid me to help them out. I’m going to be helping while we’re at school, too.”

Harry thought this sounded much more pleasant than the odd jobs he'd done for Arabella over the summer. Harry was about to mention this to Ron, but was interrupted by Mrs. Weasley's announcement of dinner. Harry and Ron, absolutely famished, raced down the stairs to find the entire immediate Weasley clan in the room, and some extras that Harry did not instantaneously recognize.

Charlie Weasley was already seated at the table, along with a raven-haired witch with sky blue eyes. She looked to be about twenty-eight and was conversing rather excitedly with Charlie, Fred and George. Bill Weasley was standing at the kitchen sink with his arm around a small, blond witch and they were both talking to his mother. Percy was holding the hand of one Penelope Clearwater, whom Harry vaguely recognized, and Ginny and Hermione were chatting with both of them.

"I remember when I became a prefect. It's a very important job, one must remember to impose punishment for any infraction of the rules..." as Percy droned on to Hermione, Harry caught her eye and made a face, to which Hermione giggled.

This caused Percy's attention to turn to Harry. "Ah, Harry! How good to see you. I was just explaining the importance of being a prefect to Hermione. Are you excited about being in such a high position?"

Stifling a giggle, Harry answered, "Of course. I completely understand the importance of being a prefect. Rules, regulations, all very important. Anything that makes Mione's head a little bigger, right?"

Hermione gave him a sharp elbow in the chest and stuck her tongue out at him. She turned to Percy, "So, Perce, how do you like your new job?"

Hermione had hit the nail on the head. Percy loved nothing more than to talk about his new job as Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. After the death of his old boss, Barty Crouch, Sr. ("May he rest in Peace."), Percy had been appointed the job, since he had been practically running the Department during Mr. Crouch's absence. Percy droned on and on about the department, and to Harry's amazement, Hermione listened intently.

Suddenly, Mrs. Weasley was calling everyone's attention. Dinner was about to be served and everyone headed out into the garden, where two tables had been set up.

Dinner was a huge, family affair. Discussion ranged from the Ministry to Cornelius Fudge, to Quidditch to the new study program, to a hundred other subjects.

Mrs. Weasley began hunting around for information about the three oldest boys' girlfriends. Charlie explained that his girlfriend, Viridian, had taken the teaching job of Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts. Fred, George and Ron were extremely interested in this and began to question her on their upcoming classes.

The latest news from the other two Weasley men served the purpose of shocking the family.

“Well, as you all know, Penelope and I have been dating for almost three years now. Upon my promotion to head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, I asked Penelope to marry me and she accepted.” At this announcement, Percy kissed Penelope’s hand with a flourish as Mrs. Weasley squealed with delight. An excited air descended on the table as Bill cleared his throat.

“I have an announcement as well.”

Mrs. Weasley looked at her oldest son with pure happiness on her face.

“Lucy and I have decided to move back to London, where we’ll be renting a flat together.”

The excitement that Bill expected was not delivered. In fact, the silence that descended upon the dining room was downright deafening. Harry looked between Mrs. Weasley and Bill. Bill had a look of love on his face as he looked at Lucy and Mrs. Weasley had a look of pure terror. She looked scandalized.

“William Weasley! I thought we taught you better than that! I can’t believe that you would make a home with a witch who’s not your wife!”

“Mum, this is no time to be old fashioned. I would think that with everything going on in the world, you would have more to be worried about than whether or not, I’m going to be getting married.”

“Don’t you understand, Bill? With everything going on lately, it’s the joys like marriage that make it all bearable.”

However, before Bill could respond, the voice of the youngest Weasley rang out.

“Mother! I think it’s wonderful that Bill and Lucy are moving in together. They’re both old enough to do whatever they want and I, for one, think it’s fantastic.”

The shocked silence deepened.

“Virginia! I cannot believe you just said that. You are fourteen years old and couldn’t possibly understand.”

“Well, it is the nineties’ isn’t it?”

Everyone broke out at once. Arthur did not offer an opinion and most of the Weasley children were excited for Bill and Percy. Molly continued to stew in her anger and quickly set about clearing away the table. She was huffily tidying up the kitchen as everyone discussed Percy and Penelope’s wedding.

It was Hermione who suggested the after dinner stroll. Ginny, Ron and Harry readily agreed, if only to escape the discussion that had inadvertently turned back to Bill and Lucy.

The four walked down the dirt road in front of the Burrow, heading towards the small village. Ron and Hermione were trailing a little behind Harry and Ginny.

“I think it’s sweet about Percy and Penelope. I bet that’s a huge surprise for my parents. I don’t think they thought that Percy would ever get married.”

“Doesn’t surprise me that they thought that though. Its not like Percy, is real, shall we say, sociable.”

“Oh, he’s really not that bad, Harry. He was always the nicest brother. Bill and Charlie treat me like a kid, which I guess in their eyes, I am. Fred and George use me as some sort of test guinea pig and Ron treats me like a baby. I guess they’re just protective though.”

“Yeah, I’m glad I haven’t had to experience any of that wrath,” he gently chided her.

Ginny simply grinned at him and reached for his hand. Intertwining her fingers with his, she gave his hand a light squeeze. “Harry, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Are we, er, you know - boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“That’s a good question. I’m not sure. Do you want to be my girlfriend?”

“Yes, I do. I’ve always liked you Harry and thought you were such a good friend.”

“Likewise, Gin.”

She looked at him then and gave him the smallest of smiles. He grinned back at her and gave her a peck on the cheek. She blushed and Harry smiled to himself. She really was a beautiful young lady. He felt another squeeze and looked to where she was currently gazing. Behind him, Hermione and Ron were locked in a tight embrace.

“They really do love each other.”

“I suppose so, although it seems that at our age, its too young to know.”

“I guess you could say that. But it doesn’t necessarily have to be true love.”

Harry did not respond. He stopped and looked at Ginny. She had a somewhat dreamy expression on her face as she gazed up at him. Smilingly ever so slightly, he wrapped Ginny in a tight hug and gave her a light kiss on the lips. She responded in the like. After a few moments, Harry broke the kiss and the young couple continued on their journey into the village.

Once they reached the village, Harry and Ginny headed down the main thoroughfare, stopping occasionally to peek into a window. They happened upon a

small store advertising in the window bunches of teddy bears that were called Sweet Dream Bears. Harry pulled Ginny inside.

“Harry, what are you doing?”

“Look! Hermione has been having awful nightmares, so I thought I could get her one of these for her birthday.”

“But her birthday isn’t for three weeks.”

“Yeah, but I won’t be able to buy her anything once we get to Hogwarts.”

“I doubt these actually work.” “Why? It’s just an aromatherapy bear that uses, err, different aromas to make you sleep soundly,” Harry responded knowingly, nodding his head to convince himself.

Ginny gave him a look that said she seriously doubted any of this, but Harry ignored her and found a bear that he thought Hermione would like. After paying for the bear with the little muggle money he had remaining, they exited the store and stumbled upon Hermione and Ron who still had eyes only for each other.

After some more browsing through the shops, the four headed back to the Burrow.

Harry awoke on their last day at the Burrow to a rather large ruckus coming from the garden behind the Burrow. He peered out of the window next to his bed and was amused by the sight that met his eyes.

Hermione’s cat Crookshanks, who had been staying at the Burrow over the summer, was currently hiding behind a bush with Daryl and Chief Pip. Harry immediately reminded himself that he needed to find out who had let the crazy stuffed animal out of the trunk. The three animals were peeking through the branches towards the garden, which was flurried with garden gnome activity. As if they had pre-ordained the entire operation, the three leapt from behind the bush all at once. Pip dashed to the right, Daryl to the left and Crookshanks right over the top. The gnomes stood stupidly in the middle of the garden, very curious as to what was going on. Suddenly, Ron and the twins appeared out of nowhere and began levitating the gnomes and flinging them as far as they could over the fence.

Daryl, Pip, and Crookshanks chased the small creatures about, running to and fro and living it up. Harry saw Ginny standing in the shade of a large tree watching the fray. He wondered where Hermione was and was surprised when she entered the room.

Immediately, she hugged him.

“Hermione! Is something wrong?” Harry asked, completely shocked.

“I’ve missed you! I’ve hardly gotten to talk to you in the past few days. I can’t believe that the hols are almost over, can you?”

“No, this has been the best summer I’ve ever had.”

Hermione nodded in agreement and looked out the window on the scene in the garden. She simply laughed and pulled him off the bed.

“Let’s go out with them, maybe we can decide what to do today.”

After shooing Hermione from the room, Harry dressed quickly and met her in the hallway. Together they went downstairs to where Operation Gnome Toss was winding down. Suddenly, George perked up.

“How about a game of Quidditch? I can dash in and get Bill and Charlie and we can play a quick game.”

Hermione looked panic stricken. “I don’t know how to play.”

Everyone looked at her in shock.

“Well, I don’t mean to say as I don’t know how to play as much as I don’t want to.”

Ron gave Hermione a peculiar look, followed by giving Harry a very worried look.

“Maybe we can just have broom races, instead?” suggested Harry.

“Yeah, but you’ll win on the Firebolt.”

“Fine, then I won’t use the Firebolt. I’m sure you have an old broom or two lying around that I could use. I’ll let Ron take the Firebolt and then Hermione can use his broom.”

Everyone agreed, even Hermione, who looked terrified. Fred began spouting the rules for the race. They were to start out right next to the house, fly through the garden with lots of loops through and around the trees, around the shed, twice around the house, and a straight shot across the yard towards the very edge of the field.

The circuit had to be completed twice. After Fred established the course, the six racers lined up next to the back door. Each mounted their respective brooms and kicked off, hovering a few feet above the overgrown grass. With a flick of his wand, George had conjured some sort of device as a starting clock. A chime sounded and they were off.

Harry felt surprisingly comfortable on Ron’s old broom. The wind whipped through his hair and he laughed as he zoomed past Ron. He couldn’t figure out why Ron always complained about his broom. It was relatively responsive and quick. The cushioning charm wasn’t too worn and the broom was pretty nimble. Harry began looping through the trees just as Ron was on his tail. He leaned forward and the

broom got a burst of speed. As Harry closed in on the shed, he snuck a look back to see that Ron was a few yards back, with a very determined look on his face.

Harry finished his first circuit as Ron closed in on his last turn around the house, Ginny was on her first, Fred and George had just reached the house and Hermione was quickly putting distance between herself and Mr. Weasley's old shed.

Harry nudged his broom harder and quickly zipped to the edge of the field where he did a complete 180 and started back to the grove of trees. Ron was on his tail every step of the way.

The two boys had just finished a loop around the shed when they heard a yell. Harry stopped quickly and Ron, not used to the speed, slammed into him. He felt himself lose his grip on the broom and tumble to the side. Ron was tumbling too, but Harry had hooked a leg over the broom and clumsily up righted himself. He whispered a charm and with a flick of his wand, Ron just barely missed colliding with a boulder in the yard. Harry turned towards the scream and saw Hermione hanging by two hands from a rather tall tree. Fred and George had not heard the yell and were already back to the Burrow to complete their final circuit. Ginny was way out by the field, having lost control of her broom at some point. Harry leaned forward and his old broom zoomed towards the grove of trees. The broom shook and teetered from the sheer amount of power flowing through it. Harry reached the trees and was almost to Hermione's tree when he saw her lose her grip.

In a split second, she was plummeting, screaming, towards the ground. Harry dipped after her and amazingly planted himself between her and the ground. She crashed into him and her slight weight knocked him from the broom.

They hit the ground in a tumble of arms and legs. Harry landed flat on his back and Hermione landed on top of him. Harry cried out in pain. He picked himself up, his back and left ankle protesting horribly. Ginny, Fred, George and Ron had reached them at this point. They immediately closed in on all sides and began trying to see if Harry and Hermione were okay. Angrily, Harry shoved them off and bent to Hermione, who was unconscious. He scooped her up, despite the shooting pain throughout his entire body. He pulled her close to his chest and began to carry her into the house. Ron followed, begging Harry to let him take her. Harry ignored him and looked down at Hermione, who was slowly coming to. She opened her eyes and looked up at him, betraying more in her stare than Harry was willing to admit he felt in his heart.

"Thank you..." she whispered before slipping off into a dark unconsciousness again.

Chapter Six: From Rags to Riches

Harry looked at the massive scarlet steam engine stretching in front of him. He balanced precariously on his left ankle, which he had injured in the fall from his broomstick yesterday. As much as Harry admired Mrs. Weasley, she was no Madam Pomfrey and could not properly mend his ankle. It was still touchy and slightly swollen, so he had been treading carefully for the past twenty-four hours.

Ginny stood next to him on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ as they waited for Hermione and Ron to step through the barrier. George and Fred had gone through before them and were already searching for their friends. Ron stepped through first, touting two tiny trunks. Hermione followed through after him. She looked exhausted and was favouring her right foot. The two walked up to Harry and Ginny.

“Hermione, we have to go to the front compartments. I guess there’s a short meeting for prefects. Will you save us seats in the compartment?” he asked, turning to Ron.

“Sure. I guess we’ll see you in a little bit then.”

Mrs. Weasley then showered them all with kisses and hugs, having just appeared from the barrier. She wished them all a good school year and reminded them to owl her before waving them off. Ron and Ginny turned and walked to the back of the train and Harry guided Hermione to the front. They were careful not to stand too close to each other giving the episode yesterday.

Harry grimaced as he thought of last night. He had carried Hermione into the Burrow and deposited her on the couch in the living room. Mrs. Weasley had rushed into the room and began fretting over Hermione. Harry collapsed on the floor next to the couch and Hermione reached for his hand. They stayed that way while Mrs. Weasley fussed and prodded them. After she had finished administering to their cuts and bruises, she’d vacated the room for Ron and Ginny to come in.

They were both positively peeved. Ron because Harry had not let him anywhere near Hermione and Ginny because Harry had not checked on her after she had lost control of her broom. Ron began raving about what a complete, girl-friend stealing cad Harry was until Hermione had promptly slapped him.

“He saved my life, you prat! Where were you during all of this?”

“I’d collided with Harry and fallen off of his broom.”

“Ah, so why is that you aren’t standing here dead?”

“Because Harry cushioned my fall.”

“Ron! You are the biggest arse I’ve ever met! He’s saved my life and yours and all you can do is whine? Grow up!”

It was at this point that Harry stormed out of the room, followed closely by Ginny who was furious with him.

“Why is it always Hermione? I’m your girlfriend, remember?”

“I refuse to even give you the satisfaction of a response. I guess pig-headedness is in the Weasley blood!” Harry shouted, very uncharacteristically, before slamming his way upstairs.

By some unanimous decision, they had all acted like nothing had happened the next morning, especially in front of the rest of the family. Mrs. Weasley had done some last minute worrying about Harry and Hermione, giving them each small vials of a painkilling potion.

As soon as Mrs. Weasley disappeared, Ginny and Ron had made it a point to studiously ignore both Harry and Hermione. Harry was of course, angry as anything about it and Hermione wanted to give Harry a very wide berth.

Great, the whole world is against me. Bloody fantastic.

They entered the prefects’ compartment. The other fifth year prefects were already waiting. Harry immediately noticed Draco Malfoy, who looked much less threatening without his thugs by his side. He also recognized a girl from Slytherin, though he could not remember her name. He also saw Stephen Cornfoot and Padma Patil from Ravenclaw and Susan Bones and Justin Finch-Fletchey of Hufflepuff.

Harry was surprised to see Professor McGonagall standing in the compartment.

“Ah, Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger, you’ve arrived. Excellent. Now we can begin. You have all been selected as Prefects for your respective houses because you are the top students in your houses for your year. You are all very intelligent and diligent and will bring much pride to your houses. Now, I’d like to introduce you all in case there are some of you who are not familiar with each other. From Gryffindor we have Hermione Granger and Harry Potter. Representing Hufflepuff House, we have Susan Bones and Justin Finch-Fletchey, from Ravenclaw, Stephen Cornfoot and Padma Patil and finally, from Slytherin, we have Draco Malfoy and Tracey Davis.

"As you very well know, you all have many important duties this year. You are in charge of your respective houses. When the head of your house is not present, you are the heads. You must enforce the school rules, issue detentions and deduct house points. I realize that for those of you that have been accepted into the Intensive Magical Study program, this will be a somewhat difficult task, particularly for Ms. Granger and Mr. Potter, seeing as both of you are in the program.

"We have devised a charm that will allow you to watch the goings-on in your common rooms and in your dorms the fireplaces have been linked directly to those in your common rooms.

"If you'll all come here, I will give you your prefect badges as well as the charms for those who will no longer be living in their houses."

Harry looked at Hermione and found a shocked expression that mirrored his own. They had very little knowledge of how the program would be run and by the looks of things, they would not be finding out until they arrived at Hogwarts.

Ron and Ginny sat opposite each other in the compartment. Ginny was angrily flipping through a copy of *Witch Weekly* and Ron was staring stonily at the trees whipping past the train.

The silence in the compartment was shattered by Ginny tearing a page in her magazine. Ron jumped at the racket and looked daggers at Ginny.

"What?"

"Could you keep it down?"

"Oh, stuff it Ron."

"Nice way to treat your brother, Gin."

"Yeah, well, if it wasn't for you, none of this would have happened."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"That means that if you weren't such an insufferable git, maybe Hermione wouldn't be so angry with you all the time and have to seek solace in my boyfriend."

"Well maybe if you were a better girlfriend--"

"Oh, that has nothing to do with it. You were the one who wasn't there to save her. Maybe if you were a little more like Harry, none of this would have happened."

"Bloody hell! I'm not Harry! Why doesn't anyone get that? What's so special about bloody Harry anyway?"

"Harry is only the greatest wizard of our time!"

"Oh, yeah, you would say that. You're all mushy-gushy in love with him, after all."

Ginny turned scarlet and whipped her magazine at Ron. "I am not in love with him!"

"You are so. It's all Harry this and Harry that. Frankly, I'm rather sick of it and one more thing--"

Ron never finished his sentence because at that moment the door to the compartment banged open and Harry stood at the door looking angry enough to spit nails.

"Enough! What on earth are you two arguing about?"

Ron and Ginny both reddened even deeper. Hermione shouldered her way into the room with a look that was distinctly reminiscent of Professor McGonagall. The anger in her eyes danced about dangerously and Ron turned purple with embarrassment.

"I am ashamed of you both! Fighting like this! Can't we just get beyond this? Ron, I have no feelings for Harry beyond the ones that are strictly platonic. Ginny, Ron does not have to be more like Harry; he's fine just the way he is. Harry is my best friend, as are you Ron and you need to learn to deal with that. Ginny, I'm sure you feel that I am deeply infringing upon your rights to Harry and I'm sorry about that. If something is bothering you, let me know. Now, let's just all say we're sorry and enjoy our last few hours of summer."

The tone in her voice left no room for debate and everyone in the small compartment grumbled their apologies.

Harry and Hermione settled into the compartment and eventually the tense atmosphere faded away. By the time the snack cart rolled around, everyone was anticipating the new school year and bantering jovially.

Harry and Ron stumbled back into the compartment with loads of Cauldron Cakes, Chocolate Frogs and Pumpkin Pasties. Ron dumped his pile of treats onto a seat and pulled four bottles of iced pumpkin juice from his robes.

"So, what was the prefects' meeting about?" He asked, looking at Harry.

"Oh you know, McGonagall giving us a lecture on the importance of following the rules. I really don't know why I got selected to be a prefect."

"Hey, you and me both," Ron chided.

"Did Professor McGonagall say anything about the program, Hermione?" asked Ginny.

"Not really. She gave Harry and I these so that we could keep an eye on the Gryffindor common room. From the sound of the things, I don't think we'll be living in Gryffindor Tower anymore."

"Wait a second. You mean that Gryffindor won't actually have any prefects living there?" Ron asked, looking as if he was developing a plan. "I should mention this to Fred and George."

"Well, it's not like we won't be watching you guys."

"Err, that's just creepy Hermione."

She playfully smacked Ron on the arm and he grinned at her before giving her a peck on the lips.

“Urgh! Get a room! Yuck!” cried Harry and Ginny, tossing various candies at the couple. This caused a fierce battle to rage inside the compartment until the compartment door slid open again.

“Oww! Damn it Potter! Can’t you all act your ages for ten seconds?”

“Malfoy, sod off.”

“As happy as I am to be here, Weasley, I came to collect your sister, Potter and Buckteeth over there. A message has been sent from Hogwarts that all the students in the Intensive Magical Study program meet up front. Guess that leaves you by yourself to wander in your neanderlithic thoughts, Weasel.”

“Shut it.”

“Your wit astounds me. Well then, let’s go. Potter, Weasley, Granger, move along.”

The three Gryffindors shot dirty looks at Malfoy as they gathered their things. They followed him out into the corridor after muttering goodbyes to Ron.

When they reached the front of the train, they were each handed a portkey. Harry felt the very familiar tugging behind his navel and found himself standing in a stately, yet comfortable room. A large fireplace took up most of the wall behind him. A fire burned cheerily in its hearth, but the room was surprisingly cool. A thick, plush grey carpet was laid on the floor and the richly appointed furniture had varying tones of deep reds and blues. Large windows added to the lightness and serenity of the room.

The room was very unfamiliar to Harry. He'd never seen anything like it in all of Hogwarts and seriously wondered where they were. It was then that he noticed the other nine students in the room. Before he began questioning who some of them were, he heard someone clear their throat and was surprised to see Albus Dumbledore standing in front of them, eyes twinkling joyously.

"Welcome to the Hogwarts School of Intensive Magical Study. As you may have already noted, you are on the Hogwarts grounds. This will be your home for the next two terms. You will learn here, study here and sleep here. You are welcome to dine at Hogwarts with your fellow classmates, if you wish, but your dorms have fully appointed kitchens should you decide to stay here. I'm sure you're all wondering about the new program. IMS, as we like to call it, has been designed to accelerate the magical studies of our ten best students each year. We have at least one representative from each year, beginning with fourth, and representatives from each of the four houses.

"This year will be very busy for you. We have several prefects in our midst as well as Quidditch team members. I hope you all plan on continuing in your school activities. Now, I think it best that I turn the podium over to your teacher. The other

students will be arriving shortly and I have to be present for the sorting ceremony. I hope that you all will join us in the Great Hall for the Welcoming Feast, which should begin in about half an hour," Dumbledore smiled at them, the child-like excitement visible in his eyes. He stepped to the side and revealed a door.

Harry nearly fell over when Arabella Figg walked through the door. The blond witch winked at he and Hermione and carefully ran her eyes over each student's face.

"Welcome. I'm sure you all have about a million questions, but let me explain a few things first. I'm Arabella Figg; just call me Arabella. I'm not one for all this Professor nonsense. We'll be studying Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures, Divination, History of Magic, Muggle Studies, Apparition, Animagi and of course, Defense Against the Dark Arts. We will be studying these topics in six-week blocks. I'll be handing out the schedules tomorrow and we'll be starting in two days' time. In the two days before lessons we'll be starting Apparition lessons, which are going to be a crucial point in your studies. I'll also be running tests to see if any of you have Animagi capabilities, in which case, you'll begin learning the process.

"Alright, now, living arrangements. There are five dorms in this building. Each dorm consists of two bedrooms and a small common area with a kitchenette and bathroom. You may live with whomever you want, regardless of gender. Let's face it, you're all mature and smart enough to handle living more independently. Of course, there's a house kitchen that you all may use and a large common area. We will be studying from ten o'clock in the morning until four in the afternoon. This arrangement will be very different from what you are used to. There will be more independent studying, guest lecturers, projects, and field trips. Your house curfew will be midnight, but keep in mind that you are only allowed in the Hogwarts main building until eleven, when the library closes. You are allowed to go to Hogsmeade when you wish but it is preferable that you are not alone when doing so. Any questions?"

The ten students stared at her incredulously. Timidly, a girl Harry did not recognize raised her hand, "So we're pretty much free to do whatever we want?"

"Yes, but here's the catch. You're all required to keep top marks. If you slip one time, one time, you will be kicked out of the program. We have a waiting list and poor performance will not be tolerated. You are under vigorous training methods. We are training you in case of a Dark uprising. You are the ten most powerful witches and wizards, underage at least, in Britain. That's a heavy weight on your shoulders. Can you all accept that?"

They all looked at her and nodded unanimously, taking comfort in the support of each other.

"Great. Now, I believe Dumbledore said something about a welcoming feast? I know I'm hungry."

The air in the room lightened considerably as they all laughed. Arabella turned back to the door she had come from and held it open for them. Harry glanced through

and saw the entrance hall. With a shrug in the general direction of Hermione, he walked through.

Ron was walking down the stairs from Gryffindor tower just as Harry entered the Entrance Hall. He dashed over and nearly knocked Hermione to the ground.

"Ow! Ron! Be careful!" Hermione winced in pain. Ron's face immediately fell and he looped an arm around her waist.

"Are you alright?" he asked, with a very concerned expression on his face. Ginny walked in, talking to the girl who had questioned Arabella earlier.

"Harry, Hermione, Ron this is Cadence. She's a Ravenclaw fourth year."

The trio nodded, as if this was not new information to them. The five IMS students began excitedly discussing the program with Ron as they entered the Great Hall.

Harry felt great warmth as he entered. Despite the many upheavals of the summer, Hogwarts still felt like home and he was glad to be back. With a sudden rush of excitement, he put his arm around Ginny and pulled her close. She seemed to sense the change in his apprehensive mood and grinned up at him before giving him a slight kiss on the cheek.

Dinner was a cheerful event. Everyone was glad to be back at Hogwarts. A feeling of safety and well-being permeated the air. The food was as wonderful as ever and everyone chattered excitedly. The students in the IMS program were sought out and questioned immediately by the other Hogwarts students. Dumbledore gave the traditional opening speech and the Hogwarts school song rang throughout the hall in a cacophony of sound.

"Excellent! Extraordinary performance this year! I have a few last minute announcements before you all return to your houses for the night. As you know, last year, Hogwarts held a Yule Ball over Christmas holidays. We have decided to make it a tradition, though on a somewhat smaller scale. We will also be hosting a Halloween ball this year. All students are welcome at the Halloween ball, but the Yule Ball will only be open to fourth years and older. Now, everyone off to bed, you have an early start tomorrow!"

With that, the Great Hall began to clear out.

Hermione and Harry waved goodbye to Ginny, promising to meet her in the IMS common room later. They had to show the first years into Gryffindor Tower and make sure everyone was settled in.

"Gryffindor first years! Over here!" Hermione shouted. Ron and Harry looked at her and burst out laughing.

"What?"

"Loud enough, there Granger?" Draco Malfoy called, surrounded by Slytherin First years, who were looking rather terrified.

Hermione shut him up with a look as the Gryffindor First years began ambling around her. Quickly, she and Harry rounded them up and led the way to Gryffindor Tower. Harry turned to the Fat Lady and said the password ("Gobstones") and led the first year boys into their dormitories. They immediately settled into their dorms without so much as a fight. Harry asked them if they needed anything and showed them the small charm near the door that they needed to activate should they need anything.

Ron was sitting in the common room.

"Where's Hermione?"

"Dunno. I think she's still with the girls."

"Yikes. The boys were pretty good. Percy told us some horror stories about the boys he's had to show the ropes."

Ron grimaced. "So, who are you rooming with?"

"No idea. I don't think anybody's decided yet."

It didn't take long for Harry to find out how very wrong he was. While he had spent dinner talking and chatting with friends he had not seen since last term, nearly everyone else in IMS had paired up with a person to room with. Ginny would be rooming with the Ravenclaw she'd introduced them to earlier, Cadence. Hermione would be rooming with another Gryffindor fifth year named Akilah Jones (Harry had no idea who she was, but realized she had been his classes all five years, he mentally hit himself at this). Padma Patil would be rooming with Cho Chang and Katie Bell and Susan Bones being the last girls left had decided to room with each other. Harry realized this and quickly threw a temper tantrum to Hermione.

"But Draco Malfoy! Please Hermione! See if Akilah will switch with me! Please?"

"Oh, Harry, grow up! It's just Malfoy. He's the only other boy, what did you expect?"

"Just Malfoy? This is the Malfoy that calls you mudblood and regularly insults your boyfriend!"

Hermione gave him a measuring look before turning on her heel and walking into her room.

"Akilah?"

"What's up Hermione?"

"I have a favour to ask you."

"Sure."

"Do you know Draco Malfoy?"

"Yup, our families have been friends for ages. Draco and I practically grew up together."

"Really? That's so strange."

"Oh believe me, I know. It was such a huge scandal when I got into Gryffindor. My family nearly disowned me!"

Harry and Hermione looked at her in shock. "Well, in that case, do you think you might like to room with him?"

"Why, so you two can have a little love nest?" She cracked, her deep brown eyes beaming at the pair of them from her dark face.

"Er, no. Heh, well, er, Harry just doesn't get on well with Draco."

"I know, Hermione, I was just teasing. Sure, I'll room with him. Cheers, darling," Akilah said as she waved her wand in the room. Her things all flew into the trunk and with a wave of her hand, she was off with her trunk levitating behind her.

Harry sagged against the doorframe. "Thank Merlin. I would have killed that slimy prat if I had to share a room with him."

"Right, now, hurry up and unpack. Ginny and I wanted to go back to Gryffindor Tower to play Exploding Snap with Ron."

Harry went out into the common room where his trunk was still waiting. He quickly levitated it into his room and met Hermione and Ginny back in the common room.

The scarlet and gold common room was nearly deserted as Ginny, Hermione and Harry climbed through the portrait hole. Except for two people sitting at the far corner of the room, there was no one in sight.

"Ha! Checkmate!"

"What? How?"

"Look, both white rooks are set to take the king. Any retreat is impossible! Ha! I have beaten the great Ron Weasley!"

"Yeah, yeah. It's because you're so pretty that I let you win."

Hermione was across the room in a flash.

"Ron, perhaps if you'd been paying more attention to the game instead of Lavender you would have noticed that you easily could have taken her king about two turns ago with your Queen and rook."

Ron jumped at the sound of her voice and turned to look at her. "Hermione, love, heh, I, er, didn't hear you guys come in."

"Yes, well, how about that game of Exploding Snap!?" Harry cut in, looking nervously between the two.

Hermione looked at Ron, fire dancing in her eyes as he completely avoided her gaze. Within seconds, Lavender has excused herself and dashed upstairs.

The tone lightened considerably, but occasionally, Harry caught Hermione looking daggers at Ron. After several games, Ginny was sleeping on Harry's shoulder and Hermione was dozing in a chair.

"I think I'm going to take these two back to IMS. They're exhausted."

"Do you need my help?"

"Yeah, just grab Hermione,"

Ron scooped Hermione off of the chair and she nuzzled into his chest. Harry gently woke Ginny up and she pulled herself off of the chair, stretching and groaning.

"What time is it?"

"About a quarter to eleven."

"Ooh, wait, Ron can't leave Gryffindor tower. He's not allowed out."

"It'll be alright. He has permission."

Ginny just looked at Harry, her eyes full of uncertainty. Finally she shrugged and followed after Ron, who was still carrying Hermione.

When they arrived at IMS, Ron looked around the common room.

"Well, this is a pretty nice set-up. Alright, we are you girls sleeping?"

Ginny just stared at Ron wide-eyed. "Err... well, I'm right over here. I'll head off now. Goodnight!" she said quickly, planting a kiss firmly on Harry's lips before going into her dorm.

"Alright, that was weird, where's Hermione sleeping?"

"She's right through here," Harry pointed, leading the way into the dormitory. He nodded to Ron before heading through the door opposite Hermione's.

"Harry? Where are you going?"

"To my room. You know, where my bed is? To sleep?" Harry prodded.

"Um, right, so then how is Hermione in this door? Wouldn't this be the boys' dorm?"

"No, this would be mine and Hermione's dorm."

Ron just sniffed, the anger flaring up in his eyes. "Ah, roomies, of course. Well, wait here, I'll be right back."

Ron whisked Hermione into the room and must have tossed her onto her bed, for he was back in the common room in a few seconds. Harry just looked at Ron, completely astounded.

"So, er, what's the problem?"

"I don't want you and Hermione living together."

"It's not like we share a bedroom or anything! We're just roomies!"

"Yeah, but... you might... you know..."

"Study together?" Harry offered.

"Well, what if you walked in on her while she was in the shower?"

"Are you trying to pick fights with everyone in Gryffindor today? Because you're doing a great job."

"Well, it's just, she's my girlfriend!"

"Yes, I know and she's my best friend. Just chill, ok?"

Ron looked Harry in the eyes, as if searching for some hidden meaning to the situation. Apparently, he was satisfied by whatever he saw and just gave Harry a curt nod before turning towards the door.

"Er, Ron, are you just going to stroll through Hogwarts?"

"Oh, right, um..."

"Here, let me get my Invisibility Cloak."

Harry returned with the silvery material in his hands. He handed it to Ron, who immediately covered himself and left.

Back in his dorm, Harry got a good look around the room.

He was somewhat glad to be back in a scarlet and gold atmosphere. His dorm room reminded him of the Gryffindor common room. A fire burned cheerfully in the small corner fireplace. There was a large, squishy armchair plunked next to the fire, complete with a small table. A few torches lit the stone walls and the only natural light came from the small windows near the ceiling. As it was dark, the windows did little to lighten the darkness of the room. A large four-poster bed was in the corner, flanked by a night table. Along one wall were a desk, a small table, a large bookcase and another chair. A large wardrobe completed the welcoming room.

“Harry?” came Hermione’s soft voice, accompanied by a soft knock on the door.

“Come on in.”

“I heard what Ron said to you and I’m sorry he acted like that.”

“It’s fine. I guess I sort of understand where’s he coming from.”

“Really?”

“No. But it doesn’t matter. What’s wrong?”

“Well, I was thinking at dinner, are you going to ask Dumbledore about your mum?”

“What about her?”

“Well surely she told him about the Mirror. Aren’t you going to find out what she told him?”

“I guess that I haven’t really thought about it. Well you’re over there, can you put some water into Daryl’s bowl?”

Hermione just nodded and picked up the water pitcher from the small table. She walked to the small bowls that were next to the desk and filled one. The small dog just looked up at her from its place on Harry’s bed. “So, what do you think about the apparition lessons?”

“Well, it’ll be interesting to learn how to do it, even if it’s pretty useless for a few years.”

“Maybe we’ll get special permits or something?”

“Like what? We have to apparate with a licensed adult at all times?”

“I don’t know. It’s not important. I’m looking forward to tomorrow. I’m getting very excited about this program,” Hermione said as she sat on Harry’s bed, watching him unpack his trunk.

Harry was hanging all of his robes and clothing into the wardrobe. After finishing that task, he returned to the trunk and banished all of the books onto the bookshelves. He sent his cauldron and potion kit to the small table. Finally, he pulled out Chief Pip.

“Harry Potter! You said I wouldn’t be in there for too long.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that. It was out of my hands.”

“Where’s Miss Hermione?”

“Right there.”

“And the pup?”

“With Hermione. Are you okay?”

“No. I was in that blasted trunk for nearly a week! Now, put me down.”

Harry did as he was told and set the small bear down who immediately jumped onto the bed and with a pat on the head for Hermione, snuggled himself next to the dog.

Hermione laughed and shook her head. She quickly lost her amusement and turned to Harry. “Do you think Ron is cheating on me?”

Harry dropped Hedwig’s cage with a clatter. “Er, I don’t think so. Is this about the whole chess game with Lavender?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, Hermione, I think that was just a game.”

“But he said she was pretty...”

“Well, she is. Granted, not as pretty as some other bushy-haired girls I know, but she’s got her good points,” Harry answered as Hermione tossed a pillow at him. “I’ll be right back.”

Harry grabbed his pyjamas and headed into the bathroom to change.

When he entered his room again, Hermione, Daryl and Pip were heaped together on the bed, stretched out in languid comfort amongst the pillows.

“Hermione, I don’t think you should stay here,” Harry whispered as he gently shook her. However, she didn’t wake and he just shrugged, climbing into bed. *At least she’s on top of the covers and the bed’s rather big. Ron’ll never know.*

The next morning Harry awoke and found his arms wrapped around Hermione, who was snuggled closely against his chest. His breath caught in his throat as he looked at her thin form, tucked comfortably into his arms. He shot up. "Hermione!"

"Harry? Wha... is something wrong?"

"No, nothing, er, its morning. We'll be late for breakfast and I know you wouldn't want to miss Ron."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him and suddenly the memory of the night before hit her. Eyes growing very wide, "Oh, Harry, did I actually sleep in here? We mustn't tell Ron! Oh no! Just forget that last night happened. Oh! Er, I'll just go get dressed. See you at breakfast," she said hurriedly as she dashed from his room.

Harry rubbed at his temples. *Ron will kill me if he finds out.* Shaking away his thoughts, Harry grabbed his school robes and headed into the bathroom to get ready for the day.

The plans to meet Ron at breakfast were dashed as soon as Harry arrived in the common room. Arabella was sitting in an armchair and the others were clustered in chairs around her.

"Ah, Harry, glad you could make it. We'll be having breakfast in here this morning, there's a lot I wanted to go over with everyone. I've finished the schedule for this year, as well as polished up the class curriculum. I want to discuss all that with you and also begin the Animagi tests before lunch.

"Starting the day after next, we're going to begin with Transfiguration. I'm going to warn you right now, you won't be transferring any buttons into beetles as long as I'm your teacher. We're going to be studying more useful Transfigurations, such as a stick into a sword. That can be very useful when your attacker has disarmed you and you don't have a weapon-Yes Hermione?"

"How would we transfigure a stick into a sword if our wands have been taken?"

"Will, Hermione. It's all about the intent. You're all strong enough that with practice you can do magic without a wand. For most of you, it will be limited, but for a few, it will come as naturally as breathing. We'll also be studying the theories of Transfiguration, as well Animagi and Apparition. Until mid-October, Transfiguration is the hot-topic around here. Afterwards, we'll be studying Divination and Defense Against the Dark Arts through mid-November. Charms and making another appearance, Defense Against the Dark Arts, will be our study until after Christmas. A mish-mashed block of Astronomy, Duelling and an Independent Study of DADA will occupy your time until the beginning of March at which point we'll be studying your favourite and mine, Potions. This will be studied jointly with Herbology. And of course, in mid-April, we're going to pick up Muggle Studies and the History of Magic, which will bring us right up to the OWLs, which you may or may not be excused from, I haven't decided yet. The useful little class of Care of Magical Creatures is scheduled for every other Wednesday, but I've decided to hold that at my discretion. Any other questions?"

The ten pupils seated around Arabella's high backed chair stared at her incredulously. Only Hermione raised her hand, "Could you repeat that last bit after Herbology?"

"Don't worry about it. Here—" and with a wave of her hand, pieces of parchment with a schedule appeared in each students hand. Arabella continued her lecture about each class they would be taking, with detailed commentary on the theories behind each course as well as the integrated study of Dark Arts into everything they would be studying. As she talked, the schedules filled themselves in with important points or dates.

Nearly an hour and a half later, Harry was beginning to get dizzy at the thought of the upcoming school year. Arabella had finished her general descriptions and had started on Apparition.

"Has anyone here ever tried to apparate? No? Well, then. Let me explain something, and this applies to Transfiguration as well.

"I doubt that any of you have ever taken any sort of physics classes, so I'll put this as simply as possible. Muggles are confined by physical limits. No muggle can turn a beetle into a button. They have a very sound belief in physical constraints. However, due to magical capabilities, we aren't confined such as Muggles. Unscientifically speaking, we have the ability to take all the little bits that make up a beetle and rearrange them into a button. We can alter even the tiniest characteristics with a thought.

"So, knowing that, apparition is simply rearranging ourselves to be somewhere else. There are no charms or wand waving or incantations for this. It's all in your head. That's why it's so carefully regulated and watched. Imagine if you were having a lousy day and weren't paying attention. You'd splinch yourself into a hutch. It'd take ages to sort out, believe me. Usually, we teach this to seventh years, but I think you all need to know how to do it. It's vital and anything that will increase your arsenal against the Dark forces is worth the effort of learning it. It's rather difficult to start Apparition, but once you've got it, it's a piece of cake. Now, I want you all to partner up. Stand facing your partner and study the area directly behind them. Picture it in your head and then simply will yourself there. Picture the area as you see it, and then imagine yourself in that area."

Hermione looked as if she didn't believe a word Arabella had said, but quickly pulled Harry off the chair he was sitting on.

"Ok, you go first."

Harry simply shrugged and looked at the area behind Hermione. He memorized it for a few seconds and closed his eyes, the image burned against his eyelids. He willed himself there and when he opened his eyes was standing behind Hermione. He tapped her on the shoulder and she spun around wide-eyed. "I don't think we're supposed to grasp it that fast!"

"Go on! Try it, Mione."

She looked at him with worry in her eyes, but appeared to be studying intently the scene behind him. She too shut her eyes and after only a few seconds, Harry heard a soft pop. Hermione was standing directly behind them. The grin on her face was wiped away as Arabella rushed over.

“Both of you! Front and centre. I want you to show everyone else what you just did.”

Harry found himself being crowded around by his classmates as he stood face to face with Hermione. They ran through the exercises again as everyone watched.

“Now, its very unusual that anyone should grasp this so quickly. However, Harry and Hermione here are the two most powerful students in all of Britain. In fact, compared with other MQ tests from other countries in the world, I think it’s safe to say that these two are the most powerful underage wizards in the world. With some training, you two will be right up there with the best of the best.”

Harry and Hermione both blushed furiously as everyone stared at them. Arabella dissipated the group and told Harry and Hermione to try apparating to other places in the IMS building.

Harry successfully found himself lying in his bed, standing on Hermione’s trunk, facing the shower in Ginny’s bathroom and in the middle of the kitchen before he headed back to the common room.

“I think you’ve all had enough practice apparating for now. You’re all free to do whatever you’d like while I test for Animagi abilities. I’ll call you one at a time and we’ll try a few things out.”

Harry and Hermione both apparated back to their dorm room.

“Harry! I can’t believe it. We’re the top students in the world.”

“Maybe. Probably not a good idea to let it get to your head though. So, what do you think of the Animagi stuff?”

“I’m not sure. From what I read, if you have the abilities, the animal you become is a representation of your most innate capabilities. It’ll be interesting to find out whether or not we can do it.”

On cue, a sound like a switch clicking echoed in the room.

“Hermione, if you could, please come to my office.”

“I’m on my way.” With a pop, Hermione was gone. Harry wandered into his dorm room, searching for some form of entertainment. He found it in the form of Daryl, Pip and Crookshanks, who were crowded onto Harry’s bed. Pip had drawn up some sort of elaborate diagram and was gesturing wildly to Crookshanks and Daryl, who were doing great impersonations of very confused statues. Crookshanks was watching the small teddy bear with an emotion that could only be described as amusement in his

eyes. Daryl had her head cocked to the side and broke the statuesque pose with an occasional tail wag. Furious, the ten-inch teddy bear tore his drawing in half and threw it onto the floor. Languidly, Crookshanks swiped a paw gently at the bear, knocking him to the side. Daryl jumped to her feet and began barking at Pip, who was lying on his head on the floor.

Crookshanks slid off the bed and under it, in search of something to play with as Daryl barked at Pip who was brushing himself off. Harry moved aside as the bear and dog slinked past him.

“Pip!”

“Yes, Harry Potter?”

“What are you doing?”

“Daryl and I were going to, er, outside?”

“Um, no. You two stay in here. Don’t make me put you on top of the bookshelf.”

They came sheepishly back into the room as Harry heard the click again, with a simultaneous pop.

“Hermione, who let the bear out of the trunk?” at the same time that Arabella called Harry to her office.

“Er, I did. He was making such a racket that I couldn’t stand it any longer. Sorry.”

“Hmm... maybe Pip could live in your room!”

“Er, no. I got him for you Harry! He’s your bear.”

“I’m so lucky. Alright, I’ll be right back.” And Harry popped away before he remembered to ask Hermione what the test had been like.

“Hello, Harry.”

“Lo Arabella.”

“Alright, let’s begin. Give me your right hand.”

Harry did so. Arabella slathered his hand in some sort of black ink.

“Now, just press your hand on this parchment.”

Again, Harry followed her instructions. The black hand on the paper slowly turned a deep red colour and quickly turned into a sort of claw with what looked like golden nails. Harry was surprised when the image changed again, this time to a massive golden paw, followed by a black paw, a black hoof, a silver paw and ended with a human hand.

“Harry, do you know what this means?”

“Should I be afraid to find out?”

“It looks like you’re a multiple shaped Animagi. Phoenix, Lion, Dog, Stallion, and Cat. You have a very deep soul Harry. Hermione has been the only other student to test positively so far and she is a panther. Shows how strong her mind is. However, this just shows that you have a soul that is deeply intertwined with magic. You are very powerful Harry.”

“I’m beginning to see that.”

“Yes, well, I’m just running tests today. I only have a few more to test and we’ll start practicing tomorrow. You all have the afternoon off by the way. Make sure you use it wisely. It’d be a good time to take a look at some of your transfiguration texts.”

“I’ll do that. Right now, I’m going to see if I can see the headmaster. I’ll let Hermione know, though.”

“See you at dinner.”

“See you.”

Harry apparated back to his dorm, where he relayed the message about the textbooks to Hermione, who immediately dashed into her room to grab the books.

“I’m off to see Dumbledore. I’m going to ask him about my mum.”

“Right. I’ll talk to you later, then.”

Harry didn’t try apparating to the Headmaster’s office, but rather walked the long passage to the stone gargoyle. When he reached the statue, he stared at him, stumped as to his next course of action.

Without warning, the gargoyle jumped back and the door opened, Severus Snape appearing at the entrance to Dumbledore’s office, “Ah, Potter. I thought I heard someone down here. Go on up. I daresay you’ll be pleased to see Dumbledore’s visitors.”

Harry just nodded and was followed up to Dumbledore’s door by Snape. He knocked on the door and it opened, revealing the circular office that Harry had grown to love.

Dumbledore was seated at his desk and Molly Weasley, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin and a blond wizard that Harry didn’t know were seated on the opposite side.

"Ah, Harry, I just spoke with Arabella and she was telling us of your abilities regarding the Animagus Transformation. Very interesting, indeed. Oh, allow me to introduce Mundugus Fletcher. He has been assisting us in this latest fight against Voldemort. Now, is there anything I can help you with?"

"Er, actually, I have a rather private matter to discuss with you."

"Ah, yes, well, why don't you have a seat? We were actually just finishing our meeting. Sirius, go ahead with what you were saying."

"Well, none of the other operatives have turned up anything. We don't know where's he hiding."

"He hasn't summoned the Death Eaters since the beginning of the summer. It's been eerily quiet for some time," added Snape. "It seems that he's up to something, but as far as I know, only Lucius Malfoy, Peter Pettigrew and a few others know what it is. As far as I can tell, he's hiding someone, or at least, something, from the majority of the Death Eaters."

"Any idea what it is?" asked Remus.

"None. It's being held very close to the chest, so to speak."

Everyone just nodded as they took in the latest news. Harry's eyes jumped from face to face, as he looked around the room. As nervous as the talk about Voldemort made him, he was rather relieved to hear that Dumbledore's operatives were searching for Voldemort. They seemed to be operating under the assumption that it was safer to find him before he attacked the school or any other part of the wizard world.

"Well then, if no one has anything else to add, I think it's time we adjourn for this week. Remus, should you hear back from Hagrid, notify me immediately."

The werewolf nodded and stood as the others began to exit the office, offering goodbyes and well wishes for the upcoming school year to Harry. Harry waved goodbye rather absentmindedly as it dawned on him that Hagrid had not been at the Welcoming Feast. He silently wondered where Hagrid was, but Dumbledore interrupted his thoughts. "Would you like to see it?"

Harry turned to the old wizard, who knew without asking why Harry was there. Harry just nodded his agreement and Dumbledore stood and walked to the cabinet where Harry had seen the Pensieve last year. He opened the left door and hanging on the inside was a medium sized mirror. The frame was dark-green in colour and intricately carved. Moving closer, Harry noticed the outline of a dragon, which covered the frame. The head and tail were on opposite sides of an intricate symbol that Harry did not recognize.

"What-- what did she see?"

"Your mother saw her death, and your father's. I interrupted her view of the mirror and she only saw as far as Voldemort attempting to kill you. Before her death, your mother saw you live, Harry."

"May I look into the mirror?"

"I don't think that I can allow that Harry. The most important thing that one must know about seeing the future is that it can often be changed. If you were to see something that was terrible, you might not see it possible for it to be changed, and you'd expect the worst."

Harry nodded. A sudden flapping of wings sounded in the room as a great Eagle owl flew in through an open window. Dumbledore went to it and left Harry standing in front of the cabinet.

As discreetly as possible, Harry peered into the mirror and was surprised by what he saw.

Hermione, looking much older was sitting at a table staring at a decrepit piece of parchment in front of her. She appeared to be puzzling something out, when suddenly, she started. Grasping her quill, she began furiously writing on another parchment as he gaze shifted between the old parchment and a book lying open on the table.

Before he saw anything else, Harry moved from the mirror as he heard Dumbledore moving behind him. The Headmaster was standing at his desk, rummaging through the drawers. He found whatever it was he was looking for and placed it into a book that had not been on the desk before.

"Harry, I'm afraid that I'm going to have to cut this meeting short. I have been summoned to London on urgent ministry business. If you should need me, Hedwig will know where to find me." Dumbledore disappeared with a pop, leaving Harry muttering about the impossibility of apparating off of Hogwarts grounds.

Harry stared out the window by the fireplace. He was waiting for Hermione to finish dressing so that they could go to breakfast in the Great Hall. He yawned as he looked at the dark clouds looming in the distance. He had been practicing Transfiguration methods until two o'clock in the morning. They had a short exam after breakfast this morning that would involve changing a rock into a broomstick and a saltshaker into a compass. Personally, Harry thought the objects they were transfiguring were rather random but Arabella had explained that when you were in a cell being held by a Death Eater, you never knew what would be in there and had to be able to transfigure any object into something useful. Harry hadn't had much trouble with it, but Hermione was struggling slightly "Harry, it makes no sense! Why would there be a salt shaker there?"

"I think you're missing the point. She wants us to be able to make any object we come across into something useful."

"Bloody hell," Hermione swore as the saltshaker began spinning around on the table top, before pointing directly out a north window.

Breakfast was uneventful. Ron complained loudly about Potions class as Harry, Hermione and Ginny transfigured the saltshakers on the table. They only stop when

one that Harry had been practicing on turned into a compass that exploded in a flurry of salt when the needle began to spin.

Luckily, everyone passed the Transfiguration test. Apparition lessons had followed lunch and Harry was lying in his dorm room preparing to settle in for the night when his door flew open.

"Harry! You must see this!"

Hermione jumped on the bed waving an Evening Prophet article in Harry's face. He grabbed it from her and his mouth dropped in shock as he read the headline.

MINISTER FUDGE DISAPPEARS

Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge disappeared this afternoon. He was seen leaving a conference with Professor Albus Dumbledore when a bright flash of purple light blinded everyone in the immediate vicinity. When the light dimmed, Cornelius Fudge had disappeared, leaving a disturbed Albus Dumbledore standing alone on the front steps of the Ministry of Magic. In an emergency meeting of the Wizards' Council, Bernard Conley was appointed the temporary Minister of Magic. The temporary Minister of Magic is a virtually unknown paper pusher at the Ministry. He started his job at the Ministry in mid-July. When asked about this unprecedented decision, the head of the Wizards' Council, Lucius Malfoy proclaimed that the unknown Ministry worker was proclaimed as Minister so that the other Heads of Departments may continue their work in these changing times. Other members of the Council proclaimed it was a safety measure. The new Minister will be making an address to the wizarding community of Great Britain sometime within the near future on the state of the wizarding community.

Chapter Seven: Destiny

“God damn it Hermione! Put the bloody book down!”

“Don’t you take that tone with me, Ronald Weasley. I’m reading something for class today and when I finish, you may have my undivided attention,” answered Hermione, her nose still buried in the heavy, leather-bound book.

“Don’t get all high and mighty with me! Can’t you just talk to me for once? How is that book more interesting than me?”

Hermione slammed the book down on the table and stared up at her red-headed boyfriend, “Gee, Ron, this book is going to help me pass through the program and I’m sure your ramblings will do nothing except make me extraordinarily bored.”

“I’m not boring!”

“Ron, please? I have two more pages to read. *Two pages!*”

“Hermione! You’re my girlfriend and I can’t even have a simple breakfast with you that includes a little bit of conversation. You’re so wrapped up in all your reading and the program and everything. I miss you,” Ron admitted, his voice softening.

“Ron! Two pages!” Hermione said, much to Ron’s chagrin.

Harry looked between the two bickering friends and Ginny, who was studiously ignoring the fighting.

With a clang, Ron slammed his fork on the table and stormed out of the Great Hall.

“Er, Hermione? Your boyfriend just ran out of the Great Hall,” said Dean Thomas, from a few seats down.

“Ah, yes, thank you, Dean. I didn’t realize. Isn’t someone going to go after him? I’m sure he’s throwing a temper tantrum in Gryffindor Tower and doing a lot of damage to pillows or something.”

Harry gaped at Hermione, “That’s hardly fair, Hermione. He had a point.”

“Oh, Harry, who are you to talk? You have just as much work as I do and I’m sure Ginny doesn’t mind.”

“Hermione, the difference between Ron and I is that I am in the program. I have just the same amount of work as Harry does. It’s just not an issue,” Ginny intervened.

Hermione, having finished her reading, sighed exasperatedly. She shut her book and gathering her things, trudged after Ron.

Seamus Finnigan let out a low whistle, “Trouble in paradise, eh, Dean?”

“I’ll say. What’s going on with those two?”

“Hermione has spent the last, oh, month and a half buried in one book or another and has basically ignored Ron. What was it Harry, last week that she didn’t talk to him for two days?” responded Ginny.

“Yeah, well, it’s not like Ron has really been pulling his weight. He’s been spending a lot of time with Lavender Brown,” Seamus said.

Harry, Ginny, Dean and Seamus all looked farther down the Gryffindor table. Lavender Brown was sitting with Parvati Patil, looking through some witch magazine. Their giggles echoed through the room. Harry just shook his head, “I hope they patch everything up soon. The constant bickering makes life very difficult.”

Everyone nodded in turn. Ginny and Harry had been playing the buffers between Ron and Hermione for the last month or so. Dean and Seamus got to be sounding boards for Ron’s complaining.

The Gryffindors began to slowly leave the breakfast table and head to their classes. Ginny and Harry walked slowly to the library, looking for something to do to pass the time until their classes began at ten o’clock.

“Why won’t you listen to me?”

Harry recognized the voice of Ron first. Just around the corner, Ron and Hermione were involved in a very heated argument.

“I do listen, Ron. It’s you who doesn’t listen. I ask you for time to study and all you do is demand that I pay more attention to you. And when I do give you time, all you bloody talk about is Quidditch! Yes, I understand you got accepted to the team, but Ron, I’ve been so busy and when I’m with you, I don’t want to talk about Quidditch. Can’t we talk about more important things?”

“Hermione! You really don’t listen to me. I didn’t get picked for Quidditch. Tryouts aren’t even until next week. And Quidditch is important. To me.”

A deep sigh, “Ron, can we not fight? Please? I don’t want to fight anymore.”

“I don’t know. It’s like you don’t love me anymore.”

“Oh, Ron, I do love you. I’m so sorry. I’ve been so busy. And you’re right; it was unfair of me to ignore you these past few weeks. I’ll try to be there for you, ok? I’ll even come to the tryouts.”

“Do you promise?”

“I promise.”

“Alright. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Silence followed as Harry turned to Ginny, who muttered a quick “Thank God,” as they passed by the corridor where Ron and Hermione were.

After meandering back to the IMS common room, Ginny and Harry began talking about the upcoming Quidditch tryouts.

“I think I’d like to try out, Harry.”

“But, Ginny, Ron will be furious.”

“Oh, sod Ron. Why can’t anyone around here ever have a little happiness?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, personally, I think Hermione is right. Why can’t Ron just understand how busy we all are?”

“But, at breakfast-“

“I know what I said at breakfast. Trust me, Harry; Ron is way off his rocker on this one. Hermione needs her space. Her career and education is very important to her and he just doesn’t understand. My brother can be so selfish and pigheaded sometimes.”

“That seems so unfair! She ignored him!” Harry said, becoming sorely agitated. His annoyance from the argument at breakfast combined with Ginny’s change of heart was beginning to boil over.

“Oh, hardly. Hermione really hasn’t increased her workload anymore than it was last year. Ron just wants her undivided attention because she’s his girlfriend and he thinks that is the role of Woman. To sit and listen to him talk about stupid things.”

“But I thought you liked Quidditch?”

“Harry, I love Quidditch, but you’re completely missing the point.”

Harry couldn’t object because at that moment, Hermione walked in from the Entrance Hall.

“Hello, all.”

“Hey Hermione. Ready for the Divination lessons today?” asked Ginny.

“Oh, hardly. Divination is such a load of, well, dung. I don’t see how it’s relevant.”

Ginny just shrugged.

“Harry, are you all right?” Hermione asked, looking pointedly at Harry.

“Oh, he ate a bad sausage at breakfast, don’t worry about it,” Ginny said as she elbowed Harry sharply in the side.

“Oww! Gin, what-“ Harry said, his aggravation with both girls evident.

“Oh! I forgot my parchment, I’ll be right back,” Ginny jumped up and ran to her dorm, leaving Harry extraordinarily perplexed and frustrated.

“Harry, you ok?”

“I’ve had enough of you women!” Harry countered before stalking back to his room.

Harry returned to the Common Room half an hour later and found Hermione and Ginny waiting for him. With a swift nod at each of them, he headed to the classroom off of the common room.

Everyone else was already seated. Arabella was sitting at the desk at the front of the room and rose to her feet when they walked in.

“Have a seat, I want to get started,” she directed as they shuffled to their desks. When they were seated, she began again, “When I attended Hogwarts, I had this Professor who I thought was really crazy. Sybil Trelawney reminds me so much of this Professor that I had, its just uncanny. I spent Years Three through Seven sitting in that awful tower, studying crystal balls, poking at mushy tealeaves and sitting elbow deep in chicken entrails. I hated Divination; still do, as a matter of fact. I think it’s a very unspecific branch of magic and I don’t like the importance placed upon it by so many witches and wizards. The truth is that a true Seer only comes along once in a blue moon. It’s a very rare thing. Then you’ve got the witches that write Horoscope columns for Witch Weekly. The future is very unpredictable and in my honest opinion, it’s dangerous to even try.

“In this block, you will not so much as glance at a crystal ball, at least not under my watch. There are some very accurate predictors out there and I don’t want you worrying about them. However, many wizards that dabble in the Dark Arts rely heavily on Divination to guide their misadventures. Grindewald saw his own defeat in the Dragon Mirror, which is currently sitting in the Headmaster’s office. Countless other Dark wizards used similar methods. Lord Voldemort is the same way.

“We’re going to be studying various methods of divining, yes, but it won’t be chicken entrails. There are far more accurate methods. You will be researching these methods, studying the predicted downfalls of past wizards and looking up Prophecies.

“This is going to be a trying course. I’m sure that many of you will find it disturbing and others will find it to be complete cow dung. Bear with me, this is really important. Professor Trelawney will be here eventually. She volunteered to work with you. I don’t know what she’s planning on, but it should be rather amusing.

“We’re going to start off talking about Destiny. It may not be a branch of divination by any means, but its very important to our studies. I’d like to ask you a question, and you don’t have to answer me, but who here believes that they have a destiny?”

Only one person in the room raised a hand.

“Draco is the only one with a destiny? Why are the rest of you here? Taking up space?”

Slowly, the rest of the students raised their hands.

“That’s more like it. Eight of you have grown up in the wizarding world. You know about wizard beliefs. Since the dawn of time, wizards and witches have always believed in a pre-determined destiny. It has been the bane of the Darkest wizards and witches to find and change their destinies.

“At a young age, Tom Riddle had his destiny determined. We have found out this much. Apparently, this destiny goes against the very grain of that Dark wizard. Voldemort’s destiny is this: He will die at the hand of a power greater than the wizarding world has ever done. After a reign of terror more dreadful than can be imagined, he will be killed mercilessly at the hand of his most hated enemy.

“As much as we know about Voldemort, we know this to be his essence. The man wishes more than anything else to cheat death. Yet it has been said, in plain English, that life is against his destiny, his pre-determined path.

“Sources on the inside tell us that Voldemort’s key plan is to cheat death. How does he do it? He already has. Voldemort, as Dumbledore told you last year, has risen again. We all, myself included, thought he was dead, killed by a baby boy. This is not the case.

“Destiny is a very powerful form of old magic. No one knows whether or not we have predetermined fates, but people tend to let any hint at a fate control their life decisions. That’s why it is so dangerous. Take for example, there is a brilliant, good-hearted wizard who does phenomenally well in school, is powerful and believes truly in the light side. However, if he has reason enough to believe that it is his very fate that he be evil, he will allow that to corrupt him.

“You must understand the role of destiny, whether or not it is real. It controls people, makes them go against the grain of their nature, makes them takes drastic methods to change their fates. The whole purpose of this program is to make you understand darkness and evil so that you can fight it. And one thing that must be understood about those on the dark side is that they are easily persuaded.

“That is why we are studying the topics we are. Being able to read a crystal ball will not help you to defeat Voldemort, but understanding why they place so much importance in it will.

“I want to start out with an interesting little assignment for you,” groans from every student in the room, “I want you to write yourself a destiny. Seal it in a parchment envelope and turn it in to me by four o’clock tomorrow afternoon.

“I’ve compiled a list of things you need to research for tomorrow’s lesson. I want today spent in the library or in your dorms, no dallying about in the common room playing chess or wandering the corridors in the main building. You must be prepared for tomorrow.

With a wave of her wand, a rolled parchment appeared in front of each student. Harry unrolled his two-foot long parchment and stared aghast at Hermione, who was quickly gathering her things to head to the library.

The group entered the library and immediately headed to the far corner of the room.

“I propose that we divide up all of the topics and tackle the subject that way. There are about sixty things on the list that we need to know for tomorrow, so we’ll each take six topics to study. I guess I’ll just take the first six,” suggested Draco Malfoy, who was already beginning to stand to collect books.

No one argued and they divided up the remaining topics. Harry’s included Dream Predictions, Tarot Reading, Destiny Cards, The Oracle at Delphi, The Dragon Mirror (Harry felt that he was getting way too much exposure to this topic.) and Astrological charts. He quickly moved to gather books on his subjects and nearly collided with Hermione.

“What topics did you get, Mione?” attempting to show his regret for his earlier outburst.

Hermione understood his motives, “I actually only got one topic. It has a few sub-topics as well. Ancient Prophecies.”

“That should be interesting.”

“Yes, I’ll be interested to see what Arabella wants us to do with all this research though. I wonder if it will be some sort of project or just reference?”

“I hope it’s not a project. I hate projects.”

“Ah, they’re fine. Where’s Ginny, by the way? I just found an interesting book on Divination rods for her.”

“Er, I think she’s over there. I’m not sure,” Harry said pointing to the other side of the library. Hermione couldn’t hide her curious look as she walked in the direction he had gestured to.

The group worked tirelessly until five-thirty, without taking even a break for lunch. Harry was mentally exhausted. He stumbled into his dorm room and promptly passed out on the bed.

“Harry, grab your broom! We’re going to be late for Animagus training.”

Hermione pulled Harry off of the bed and stood him upright. She handed him the Firebolt that had been perched in the corner and together, they walked out to the Entrance Hall.

Animagus training had been moved off of school grounds to a Ministry of Magic controlled office in Hogsmeade. Harry and Hermione had been flying into Hogsmeade twice each week to meet with a wizard whose name Harry could not remember. Once inside the dingy little office, the wizard would put them through rigorous exercises involving the transformations.

Harry’s first transformations had been very difficult and uncontrolled. Hermione had picked up the task excellently, but as Harry pointed out, she was only one animal.

He was finally grasping the concept of picking his a specific animal to transform into and was rather glad that the wizard wouldn’t be yelling at him anymore. Harry thought that he had horrible garlic breath and it made the whole lesson rather unbearable.

Once outside, Harry mounted his broom and waited for Hermione to join him in the air. Harry and Ron’s birthday gift had been received rather cautiously after the incident at the Burrow. However, Harry had taken Hermione down to the Quidditch pitch and given her proper flying lessons. She was still terrified and Harry flew rather slowly so that he could stay right with her, but she was definitely getting the hang of it.

They reached the office and found a note on the door reading that lessons had been cancelled and they should return the following week. Harry was inwardly thrilled, as he was starving and exhausted.

They flew back up to the castle at a very leisurely pace, enjoying the cool autumn evening.

When they returned to the castle, Hermione headed back to their dorm and Harry went off in search of Ron. As he entered Gryffindor tower, he was pummelled by a rather large pillow.

"What-"

"Hiya, Harry, what's up?"

Lavender Brown was perched on a couch in front of the fire and Ron was stretched out next to her. Harry simply let his eyes wander around the common room before looking directly at Ron, without acknowledging Lavender.

"Hermione wanted to know if you wanted to come to the dorm for awhile."

"Sure, can Lavender come?"

"Er, I don't see why not..."

"Great. Let's go." Ron jumped off of the couch and pulled Lavender along with him.

As they entered the IMS common room, Lavender looked around in awe. "This is so cool! Where are the dorms?"

Harry raised his eyebrow at her before directing them both to the door to his room. Hermione was sitting at the counter in the small kitchenette when they entered.

"Hello Ron," she said looking up from her book. As she noticed Lavender, Harry saw her anger flare up, "Good evening, Lavender."

"Hey, Hermione! What are you reading?"

"It's a book on ancient prophecies. We're studying Divination right now."

"Really? Is Professor Trelawney working with you?"

"Thankfully, no."

"But she's the best teacher at Hogwarts!"

Harry dropped the bottles of butterbeer that he had been taking out of the fridge. They were charmed to be unbreakable but the loud clatter stunned everyone in the room. Lavender stood looking between Harry and Hermione whom were both trying to refrain from laughing.

Becoming indignant, Lavender admonished them, "Well, maybe if you two had a little more respect for such an important branch of magic! Take Ron for example. Did you know that he's the best student in Divination this year?"

As Harry and Hermione dropped all pretence and began laughing hysterically, Ron turned as red as his hair.

"Ron? The best Divination student? Tell me, this month, will he be dying by suffocation from an unruly vine during Herbology or drowning in a bucket of soapy water while serving detention with Snape?" Hermione chortled through her giggles.

It was Ron's turn to be indignant, "Hermione! That's not fair! You're just jealous because I'm excelling at a subject that you can't even pass."

The laughing ended abruptly. "Ronald Arthur Weasley, how dare you insult me."

"Well, you sure can dish it out, but it looks like you really cannot take it, " shot Lavender.

Hermione whirled from her boyfriend to the unwelcome intruder standing in her dorm, "You, Lavender, would do well to remember whose dorm room you're in. Despite the fact that you enjoy hanging all over my boyfriend, it gives you no excuse to come into my room and insult a prefect."

"Hermione, don't you dare throw your weight around like that. You can't talk to Lavender that way."

"I'll speak with her anyway I damn well please. Five points from Gryffindor to you Lavender for insulting a prefect and five points for you as well, Ron. If you don't leave now, I'll take another ten."

"You cruel, heartless wench! How dare you insinuate that I am doing anything with your boyfriend? You cannot order me around like this, I'll go to McGonagall," threatened Lavender.

"Oh, go right ahead. Another five from Gryffindor for directly disobeying a prefect."

Lavender, red with fury, stormed from the room, slamming the door so hard that the walls shook.

Hermione turned to Ron, "Aren't you going to go after her?"

"Hermione, I am so sick of this! Come down off of your high horse. Why do you have to be so mean to her?"

"She came into *my* dorm and was insulting *me*! I hardly see that beyond reprimand, even if she is your little mistress."

"What has gotten into you Hermione? She's just a friend, a friend who is there for me. She's a better friend than you are at the moment."

This seemed to catch Hermione off guard and she quickly lost the glint in her eye. "You really believe that?"

"Of course I do. I don't like it any, but it's the truth. And it's not as if you aren't finding companionship elsewhere! You spend every waking moment with Harry, probably even see him more than his girlfriend, who I'll remind you is your best girlfriend, as well as my sister."

Harry jumped in, "Now, Ron-" just as Hermione launched into another tyrant.

"Oh, and I suppose you're going to blame everything on Harry then? That is just so like you Ron, shifting the blame to someone else. Harry has been there for me, he's helped me study and he was there to rescue me from the accident. You've never been there for me, Ron, never!"

"So, we're back to this again? Perfect, bloody Harry! You know what, Hermione, I don't care any more. Harry is more important than I am. Harry is the best. Harry this,

Harry that. Whatever, it doesn't matter any more. I'm going to go find Lavender and try and repair the damage. Harry, I'm sorry that I brought you into this."

Hermione just looked at Ron, as he turned to leave. She offered no protest, but just stared after him with a very sullen look on her face.

And Ron stormed from the room, leaving a very angry, very hurt Hermione and a completely shocked Harry.

The next morning in class, Hermione was not speaking to Harry. Harry really didn't mind, as he was furious with her for bringing him into the argument. After Hermione had slammed her way into her bedroom, Harry had grabbed his invisibility cloak and headed to Gryffindor tower.

As he had suspected, Ron had been brooding in the common room.

"I figured you'd come. Is she alright?"

"I don't know. She stormed off into her room without saying a word to me, as if all her problems are my fault."

"Harry, I don't think that things are going to work out between Hermione and I."

"Well, I hate to say this, but you two bring out the absolute worst in each other."

"Don't think that I haven't noticed. I don't know what to do. I love her, I do."

"Ron, we're way too young to be worrying about love. If you're not having fun, then I think you know what you should do."

Ron just looked at him through half-closed eyes. With a nod, he stood and announced he was going to bed.

Harry pulled himself out of his reverie and glanced at the Muggle clock on the mantle. At exactly ten o'clock, Arabella burst into the classroom.

"Does everyone have their destinies written out? I changed the lesson plans a little bit. If you all have them, I'd like to read them over and then thought maybe we could discuss them."

Everyone nodded his or her agreement, but Harry instantly felt very foolish. As he'd been leaving the Gryffindor common room last night, Lavender and Parvati were entering it. Both had been terrified by him standing there and Harry promised not to deduct points as long as they'd help him with his homework assignment.

Surprisingly, the two were well versed in destiny related Divination. Parvati had disappeared and returned a few moments later with a pack of what looked like Muggle Playing cards. However, she asked him his birthday and immediately,

through some method that Harry couldn't figure out, she withdrew a ten of hearts. Harry had used Parvati and Lavender's information about the card to formulate some sort of destiny for himself and after a fashion; he had come up with something he hoped was plausible.

He turned the parchment into Arabella, who briefly skimmed it over with an added "Very well done, Harry" before she turned to Draco, who was handing in his as well.

After twenty minutes, Arabella cleared her throat to signal an end to the various conversations in the room.

"Well, these were certainly very interesting. I'm not sure what methods most of you used to come up with these, but it doesn't matter, as this was just an exercise to see how many of you truly realised your potential. Harry, yours was done phenomenally well. What methods did you use?"

Harry quickly explained how Parvati and Lavender had shown him the Cards of Destiny. Ignoring, Hermione's dirty looks, Harry talked about what his card meant and how he had come to the very general destiny that he'd written.

Arabella looked pleased and excused herself.

A few minutes later, she returned with Lavender, Parvati and the deck of cards. Parvati went through the same motions that she had with Harry for each student in the class. Lavender and Parvati took turns explaining each of the drawn cards in great detail and the class was amazed at how surprisingly accurate they were. Hermione's card had been the Five of Clubs, the Card of Intellectual Restlessness. The girls even went so far as to explain Harry's card, which was the Card of Social Success.

After their brief lesson on the cards, the girls left. Hermione was, of course, in an even more vicious mood and didn't so much as raise her hand for the entire day.

The day went on quietly with much class debate over destiny and the meanings of the cards that each had drawn. A majority of the class ended up changing what they had written the night before.

Lunch came quickly and Harry, Hermione and Ginny walked sullenly to the Great Hall. Harry and Ginny immediately separated from Hermione, who plunked herself down next to Ron with a very determined look on her face. He didn't say a word or even so much as look at her. He simply stood up and she followed him from the Great Hall.

"I think that I'd like to go to Hogsmeade after class today, Ginny, would you like to come?"

"Won't Hermione and Ron want to come?"

"Hermione who?"

"Harry, you cannot be mad at her like this. You're being just as childish as they are."

“How am I being childish? I cannot believe that they brought me into the argument.”

“Harry, I would love to go down to Hogsmeade after class today,” Ginny said, abruptly ending all Ron/Hermione related discussion.

Harry, having finished his lunch, gathered his things to head to the library, where he would spend the rest of the afternoon.

Harry was not surprised to see Hermione in the library. They had not talked in nearly a week and she seemed to be everywhere that he was. He sat at a table in a far corner, as far away from her as he could get.

He ignored the shadow that passed over the table.

“Can I tell you a story?”

No response came.

“It’s about a girl who had the best friend a person could ask for. He was kind and loving and patient and protective. He knew her inside and out and she threw it all away by falling in love with his best friend and dragging him into the middle of their fights.

“One day, she realized her mistake and went to apologize to him.”

“And then what happened?” Harry asked, still not looking at her.

“Well, that’s really left up to the imagination of the reader.”

“Ah, and what’s your version?”

“That the boy accepted, but only under the pretence that his friend do something to make it up to him.”

“And what does she do?”

“She cooks him dinner every night for the rest of the term and promises to leave him out of all future arguments with said boyfriend.”

“You do realize that this has been a dreadfully boring week don’t you?” Harry said, finally looking up at her with a smile on his face.

Hermione plopped down into a chair, “Oh, yes, let me tell you. Ron has been nervous as anything about the tryouts tonight. I’m so sick of Quidditch.”

Harry smiled at her and they continued the conversation as if the fight had never happened.

The weather during the week of Harry and Hermione's fight had been dreadful. Windy, rainy and cold weather had created a very lifeless atmosphere in both IMS and Hogwarts.

Harry had spent much of the past week dividing his time between the library and helping Ginny work on some complicated Keeper manoeuvres. Three times he had been to the infirmary for a Pepper-Up potion, after spending hours in the rain and wind helping Ginny.

The weather seemed to break especially for the Quidditch tryouts. It was still cold, but the wind and rain had vanished and Harry was relieved.

He had gone directly to the Quidditch pitch after practice for a meeting with the rest of the team.

Alicia Spinnet and Katie Bell had decided upon a complicated grading system for find their new keeper. Apparently, Angelina had spent much of the first month of school owling Oliver Wood on the best ways to find a keeper.

Harry was dizzied by the system that had set up. Some sort of elaborate obstacle course had been created that each keeper candidate must pass. There were also tests for quickness, agility, and creativity. Harry grimaced as he looked at the grading sheets for each person trying out. Inside, Harry was thrilled that he didn't have to try out for the team.

Harry was doing a circuit around the pitch when a large group of people ambled down to the pitch. Harry picked out Ron, Hermione and Ginny easily enough. Ginny and Ron were wearing Quidditch training robes and keeping a good distance from each other. Hermione had a book under one arm and Daryl's leash in one hand. The small puppy was tugging furiously at the leash and would occasionally jump against Ron's legs, causing Ron to trip more than once.

A small crowd gathered at the pitch for tryouts. Harry recognized a few teachers, several students, some parents and a very unfamiliar solitary figure sitting at the top of the pitch. Seeing the strange figure, Harry got a very uneasy feeling, but shook it off, owing it to his not having eaten dinner.

The tryouts were brutal. Fred and George spent a good forty-five minutes battering the candidates with beaters from every angle. Alicia had insisted that each person trying out had their hands tied to their broom so that they could judge handleless protecting techniques. Though this had brought about many groans of protest, everyone obliged.

Those were some of the easier tests. After nearly three hours, the last person on the field trying out for the new position collapsed with the others onto the cool grass. Alicia whistled to Harry, who had been flying above, watching from a higher vantage point. He headed down and met his teammates at the end of the pitch.

Nobody said a word. Alicia spoke first, "Well?"

Nearly in unison, all six players said "Ginny."

She had flown the quickest, had the sharpest eye, and demonstrated the most awareness and creativity. Ginny was a natural keeper, very protective of what she thought was hers.

Angelina called to the heap in the middle of the pitch, "Go shower! You all stink! Be here tomorrow at five o'clock and we'll let you know our decision."

Harry thought this was unnecessary, but nodded his head with the rest of the team.

After Harry had changed out of his Quidditch robes, only Hermione was waiting for him. Ginny and Ron had gone back up to the castle, still not speaking to each other.

"So, what do you guys think?"

"Mione, you know I can't tell you that."

"You picked Ginny, didn't you?" Harry's look must have answered her question, "That's what I figured. She's a natural, Ron couldn't beat her if she was blindfolded."

Harry just laughed.

"Excuse me,"

Harry and Hermione both turned around to face a wizard with dark hair and very blue eyes, "You must be Harry Potter and Hermione Granger. I'm Bernard Connelly."

"Ah, Minister Connelly! How nice to meet you. You guess right. What brings you to Hogwarts?" asked Hermione, her cautious mood instantly vanishing.

"I have a meeting with Dumbledore, but he was running late so I thought I'd come watch the Quidditch game."

"Did you play Quidditch, sir?" Piped up Harry.

"No, my parents travelled quite a bit, so I was schooled in America. I did play Quodpot, but that's a bit different than Quidditch."

"Really? I've only read a little about it, but it sounds pretty interesting," Harry said.

They'd struck a chord with the minister, who launched into a vivid description of the game. By the time he had finished, Harry and Hermione were at the door to IMS. After saying goodbye, they ducked into the room, leaving the new minister to find Dumbledore.

"He seems very nice, he is rather young though."

"And he plays Quodpot," added Harry.

"Well, not that it matters, Harry. If you ask me, I think he'll probably be a much better minister than Fudge ever was. The twenty thousand galleon question will be whether or not he accepts the fact that Voldemort has risen again."

"Honestly, though, how likely is that? I would say the resurrection of Voldemort is a bit of a taboo topic."

"And I would say that that's a bit of an understatement."

The following morning, Harry awoke to find a piece of parchment taped to the dorm room door. It simply read that classes had been cancelled and that he was to be in the Great Hall no later than ten thirty. When he asked Hermione, she had no idea what was going on.

"I'll bet you ten galleons it has to do with Minister Connelly."

"Do you take me for a fool? Honestly woman."

Hermione slapped Harry playfully on the arm before heading back to her room to get ready for the day. Harry did the same and met Hermione back in the common room.

The entire school was seated in the Great Hall. There was some sort of stage with a podium set up where the teacher's table usually was. Rows and rows of chairs replaced the house tables. In the corner of the room, a crew was busily placing wires along the ground leading the stage and microphones were being tested.

Harry and Hermione found seats with Ron and Ginny. Lavender was seated with them as well and received many cool glares from Hermione, who had protectively wrapped her hand around Ron's and was doing her best to give him her undivided attention.

Within a few minutes, the hall had become eerily quiet. The entire student populace was waiting in anticipation. A door off to the side of the stage creaked open and Professor Dumbledore strode onto the stage.

"Good morning. I have requested that you all be here today because we have a special guest speaker. I'd like to welcome Emergency Minister of Magic Bernard Connelly."

A collective gasp rose as students craned their necks to catch a glimpse of the dark haired wizard making his way to the stage.

He reached the microphone and faced the school with a very grave look on face, a complete opposite of the man that Harry and Hermione had met the previous night.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I stand up here today with some very grave news. As you know, approximately six weeks ago, the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, disappeared without a trace from the wizarding world. The ministry has searched endlessly for a clue to his whereabouts and the search has not been in vain. After receiving an anonymous tip yesterday, the body of Cornelius Fudge was found in an alleyway near a small muggle factory. After a thorough search of the surrounding area, the ministry aurors have found enough evidence to charge a man with the kidnapping of murder of Cornelius Fudge. Today, a warrant has been issued for the arrest and trial of one Rebus Lupin. We have it under direct testimony that Remus Lupin has been associating with Death Eaters for the past sixth months."

Not a sound was made in the Great Hall. Every teacher at Hogwarts sat to the side with stunned and scared looks on their faces. Even Professor Dumbledore had lost the twinkle in his eyes and was barely hiding his shocked expression. Clearly, this was not what he had expected.

"We have also found evidence that escaped convict Sirius Black has been instrumental in the abduction of late Minister Fudge. At this time, we ask for every witch and wizard in Britain to assist us in the capture of these two dangerous men. If found, it is within the best interest that the witch or wizard do not attempt to detain them, but rather a signal be sent out for assistance from the Ministry."

"Thank you for your time today and I find it appropriate that we now exercise a moment of silence for the late Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge.

Silence was the only thing plausible at the moment. A click announced that the broadcast had ended and the Hogwarts professors stood to thank their guest. No sound was heard until a thump rang out in the graveyard like graveyard. Arabella Figg had passed out in the middle of the stage.

Two days later, classes resumed at Hogwarts. The memorial service had been held the day following the new Minister of Magic. The day after the service had been spent in quiet reverie. Harry walked around the castle in a state of shock and suspicion. He knew, somehow, that neither Sirius nor Remus had been responsible for the Fudge murder, but every other student in Hogwarts was wary. Many blamed it on the fact that Remus was a werewolf and no wonder; he *was* associating with a known murderer. Arabella had not emerged from her quarters, even for the memorial service. When Harry had seen her the previous night in the kitchen, she smiled warily at him before retreating to her room without a word.

It was about twenty minutes after ten o'clock and Harry thought it very strange that their teacher was late. A commotion outside the door that led to the Entrance Hall startled Harry from his revelry.

"Damn it Sybil! Can't you help carry all of your things?"

“Darling, carrying the Divination Tools clouds my inner eye. As the Seer, I feel it necessary to keep my distance from the Tools and allow them their personal space and freedom. I cannot disrespect them.”

Harry heard a grunt from Arabella as the door from the entrance hall was flung open. Arabella stood at the door balancing what looked like a crystal ball, several heavy tomes, and a bag full of long rods, looking rather like her old self instead of the haunted woman he had seen the night before. She was holding the door open for a woman whom Harry thought looked rather like an insect. Sybil Trelawney floated through the door and looked at the congregated students with her bug-like eyes hidden behind large spectacles.

“Hello everyone. Would one of you kindly cover the windows? It is very bright in here.”

Cadence obligingly shut the curtains the covered the windows and the room dimmed considerably, lit only by the burning fireplace. With a wave of her hand, Professor Trelawney summoned a high backed chair to her side and a small table. She sat and motioned to Arabella, who begrudgingly placed the long rods and the crystal ball on the table. She dropped the tomes at the Professor’s feet and received a reproachful look for it.

“Now then. How many of you have had a Divination Class prior to the start of this program?”

Every student, even Hermione, raised their hands.

“Very well. As you know, Divination is perhaps the most important magical art. Entire kingdoms were built upon prophecies. Though not exact,” Hermione snorted at this. “Divination is key to understanding the Dark Arts. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named based his decisions heavily on carefully researched Prophecies and predictions. Therefore, it is understandable that you all need to have a deep knowledge of unfogging the future. I can sense that in many of you, your inner eyes are not strong, a here to help you in any way I can.

“I have brought several of the most important books containing predictions and prophecies ever written. Some of these date as far back as the Founding of Hogwarts. I’d like you to partner up and skim through the books. Find a prediction that interests you and report back to me what you find out about it. I predict that these will be due by the end of the year.”

With that, she stood up and walked from the room, heading back into the Hogwarts main building. All of her books and rods were still strewn around the chair she had been sitting in.

The ten students sat in stunned silence. It was Hermione who laughed first and everyone else was quick to follow. Opening her eyes very wide, Hermione turned to Harry, “I predict a lot of general bullshitting is going to occur during the course of this project.”

Harry just snorted as Arabella cleared her throat.

“Well, then, er, there you have it. Really, she drives me mad. Professor Trelawney had told me that she would be working with you all day and I scheduled an important meeting with Professor Dumbledore, so I guess you can take the day off. Mind you, it may be a good idea to start on your, er, predictions, but it’s up to you. Enjoy your day.”

Hermione grinned and pulled Harry out of his chair.

“Let’s take a walk to Hogsmeade. I want to get out and enjoy the fresh air.”

“Well, you’re certainly in a mood today.”

“Have you looked outside? It’s a beautiful day! This is the best weather we’ve had in weeks and it’ll take your mind off things.”

Hermione ran to their dorm and emerged with two cloaks, tossing one to Harry; she pulled him towards the Entrance Hall.

“Hermione! Hold on, I want to see if Ginny would like to come. Besides, isn’t Ron’s morning free? Perhaps he’d like to come?”

“Oh, forget about them, it’ll be fine. They won’t even notice we’re gone.”

Harry looked back at Ginny, who was sitting in front of the fireplace with Cadence, one of the large tomes across her lap.

Shrugging, he followed Hermione out of the castle and down towards the village.

As they neared the Three Broomsticks, laughter broke the silence of the quiet fall day as a group exited the tavern. They were obviously Hogwarts students. There was pushing and shouting mixed in with the laughter echoing joyously on the deserted street in Hogsmeade.

Harry immediately picked out the red head a few inches higher than everyone else’s. Ron had his arm around Lavender and was being playfully shoved by Dean Thomas, who was being hung on by Parvati Patil. Seamus Finnigan was busy tickling another blond witch that Harry recognized from their year and didn’t stop when the others did.

Ron had noticed Harry and Hermione first and stopped dead in his tracks. Dean had issued a well-placed punch that grazed Ron’s arm as he noticed the two approaching prefects. Seamus slammed into Dean who stumbled and grabbed for Ron. Ron caught himself, not once breaking eye contact with Hermione.

"Er, Hermione. Hello. Hey Harry."

"Ron," Harry answered, who was now watching Hermione apprehensively.

Hermione's parting words before she apparated back to the school astounded everyone within hearing distance. The very pronounced, very deliberate words echoed callously in Harry's mind for several hours after.

"Fuck. You. Ronald. Weasley."

Harry immediately apparated away to find her and Ron followed on foot. Harry found Hermione sobbing in her room and twenty minutes later a loud pounding announced the entrance of Ron.

"Hermione, we need to talk right now. Alone."

"What makes you think I want to talk to you? And besides, anything you have to say to me, you can say to Harry."

"Hermione, it's alright. I'll just be in my room."

Ron looked at Harry with a mixed expression of gratefulness and exasperation.

Harry nodded at them both and walked to his room, gaining no reprieve from the ensuing argument.

"Hermione, we were just enjoying our free time. Nothing is going on with Lavender!" Ron shouted as soon as Harry had shut the door.

"Ha! You expect me to believe that. You come sauntering out of a pub, reeking like alcohol, with your arm around, some- some tart! And you expect me to believe that nothing is going on? Don't try to explain, Ron, because frankly, I don't want to hear it!"

"Well what about you and Harry being there? Did you even try and find me before going off to Hogsmeade with my best friend?"

"Oh, don't you dare try and pin this all on me! Harry and I were excused from classes today and were out enjoying the weather. Since you've been so busy with Lavender lately, I wouldn't expect you to notice that Harry has been completely distraught over what's been happening lately."

"So, you two were going to go off for an afternoon of snogging to whisk all his troubles away?"

"That's not how it is and you know it. If you want out of this, stop looking for an easy way out and just do it already."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Please Ron! You want out of this relationship more than I do. It's written all over everything you do. What's keeping you with me?"

"Hermione, if you're trying to say that I don't love you, you're very wrong. You are my everything."

"I can't believe that. Because Lavender is something to you. You may love me, but you don't want to be with me."

"We fight so much and we don't have anything in common any more."

"I know."

"Hermione, I-" he paused.

"What?"

"I just can't do this anymore," and he walked out of her room, passing Harry, who was nonchalantly reading a book in the small living room.

"Harry, um, talk to her?"

"I will."

"Thank you."

As soon as Ron had left, Harry dropped his book and walked unceremoniously to Hermione's room.

She lay crumpled on the bed, sobbing. "Harry, please just leave me alone. I need to be by myself."

"Alright, I have a few things I want to do today, I'll be back around six thirty, seven at the latest. Do you need anything?"

"No."

"Bye, love. You'll be ok," he said, giving her a quick kiss on the top of the head before leaving.

Harry spent the rest of the day reading up on the topic they had picked for Trelawney's project. Hermione had suggested an ancient prophecy that she had come across while doing research for the topics Arabella had assigned. She'd shown him the book that mentioned it and he searched for it in the library, finding it in a far, dusty, forgotten corner.

The book was bound in an ancient leather and Harry was annoyed to find the entire thing written in Latin. When had Hermione learned Latin? Shaking his head, Harry grabbed a Latin dictionary and using a translation spell, began the slow process of translating the book.

This served to be no easy task and five o'clock came much faster than Harry expected. Even though he technically wasn't allowed to apparate, he was running late

for the Quidditch meeting. It had been postponed due to the Fudge incident and Harry knew that the group trying out anxiously awaited to hear whom the new Gryffindor Keeper would be.

Everyone was gathered on the pitch, awaiting Harry. The silence was full of anticipation and as soon as Harry popped onto the pitch, Katie Bell cleared her throat.

“We’re going to make this short and sweet. We were looking for a Keeper who was quick on his or her broom, who was agile, creative and not afraid to get in the face of the opponent. You all were excellent, but one of you truly surpassed the others,” at this Ron pulled himself up, looking rather smug as Ginny rolled her eyes at him, “Ginny Weasley, we’d like to welcome you to the Gryffindor team.”

Cheering and applause erupted from the small gather group. Ginny received a great deal of pats on the back and wishes of good luck. She made her way to Harry and flung her self at him in joy. He was happy to hug her back, glad to have something good happen this day.

The stormy look on Ron’s face ended Ginny and Harry’s embrace. Harry pulled away from Ginny at the eyes of his best friend, which had taken on a reddish glint. Harry swiftly walked to his best friend, who continued to glare at Ginny.

“Ron?”

“Damn women. Harry, I am so anti-girl right now, you have no idea. They always get everything they want. It’s always about them. When do we blokes get a break? Never, that’s when.”

Harry tuned out his friend’s diatribe. Ginny was still ecstatic and was being hugged by the twins, who were very proud of their little sister. Eventually the celebration moved from the pitch to Gryffindor tower, where Harry snacked on food ransacked from the kitchen and ice-cold butterbeer.

One did not have to look hard to see the small mountain of tissues in Harry’s dorm room. Hermione was curled on the couch, wrapped in a blanket emblazoned with the Gryffindor logo, and sobbing loudly. As Harry moved closer, he saw the sweet dream bear that he had given her for her birthday. She clutched it close to her face, and crying tears of agony into the soft bear.

“Oh, Harry...” she moaned, moving aside for him to sit on the couch. He sat next to her and she moved onto his lap, sobbing against his chest.

Though he found it awkward, Harry did not move and only held the sobbing girl until her tears and shakes subsided.

“Harry?”

“Yes, Mione?”

“Am I a horrible person? Was Ron right?”

“You’re not horrible, Hermione. And was Ron right about what?”

“He said I was selfish and that I ignored him.”

“You’re not selfish. Look at all you do for others, Hermione. Think about S.P.E.W. and all of the reading you’ve done to help out Ron and I. The fact that you’re even in IMS shows what a good person you are. You’re here to be the best witch you can be so that you can go out there and save the world. You’re hardly a bad person and as for ignoring Ron, I don’t think you were doing it intentionally.”

This brought a fresh wave of tears from Hermione, who curled herself even tighter against Harry.

For hours they sat like that, Harry holding onto his best friend, who was crying for dear life. Occasionally she would ask him questions about Ron or the Quidditch tryouts or her relationship with Ron. Harry did his best to answer, but always came fresh tears.

At around two o’clock in the morning, Hermione had cried herself to sleep. Harry felt as if his entire person was numb, but dared not move, for fear of waking the troubled girl.

He shifted and leaned his head against the armrest, content to fall asleep himself.

Harry stretched languidly on the grass as the cool autumn sun filtered through the leafy overhang above him. He felt each individual blade of grass between his fingers. The sky was a deep blue and reminded him of the colour of his aunt's eyes. A soul bird chirped off in the distance and Harry slowly sat up. He looked out at the grove stretching before him. Off in the far corner of the valley, Harry noticed a clump of trees and instinctively walked towards it. When he was a good ten yards from the trees, a deafening scream met his ears. Before his mind could object, his legs propelled him forward. As he ran, the sky darkened and thunder sounded in the distance. Streaks of lightning flashed in the sky as Harry rushed through the trees. His foot hit a root and he fell to the needle covered ground. Pulling himself up, Harry felt a shadow pass over him.

"Good evening Harry."

"Where am I?"

"Harry, I have the infinite knowledge of the universe and all you ask me whenever we meet is where you are. However, this time, I will tell you. You're at Godric's Hollow."

"Tristram, why am I here?"

"Well, my master has a mission for you."

Harry stood and followed the man towards the house. Tristram was very old looking. He had a sage-like air about him that made Harry feel strangely calm.

Another scream shattered the silent woods. More claps of thunder and lightning flashes followed as they reached the house.

"Ah, Harry, so nice to see you again."

The voice chilled Harry to the bone. He shivered as Voldemort stepped closer to him.

"I have something I'd like you to see Harry."

"Whatever it is you want me to see here, I'm sure that I don't want to see it."

"Just wait."

And the three men walked into the small cottage. Lily and James Potter sat on the couch, chattering softly. Harry looked around the room. A small cosy living room was the main focus of the house. A fire burned cheerily in the grate and a blustery fall wind sounded outside. Suddenly, the front door banged open and Lily screamed.

"Lily! Take Harry and get out of the house!"

The young redheaded witch did as she was told. Another Voldemort walked up to James and without so much as another word screamed the Death Curse at James Potter.

Harry watched in horror as his father fell, soundlessly to the floor. Calmly, Voldemort stepped over Harry's dead father and walked to the room that Lily had fled too.

There she stood, guarding Harry's crib. She was holding a chubby baby in her arms, trying to shield him with her body. Voldemort was standing facing down Lily, who was crying silently, begging him to kill her instead. His wand poised to kill, he turned suddenly.

"Ah, Harry Potter. You'll do nicely. *Imperio.*"

Harry felt the Imperious Curse dull his senses. His mind went through the familiar actions of fighting the curse, however it did not ebb away.

Kill her.

I don't want to.

Kill her.

Harry screamed as his mind freed itself from the curse. A new feeling flooded his body. He felt himself being pulled out of his own body. Floating above the scene below him, he saw himself raise his right hand and whisper the words. A very slow moving green light, nearly imperceptible, poured from his outstretched hand. It struck his weeping mother right in the chest, her eyes wide with surprise and fright as Harry hovered overhead.

She screamed and fell, baby Harry flying from her arms.

Harry's mind flooded with terror. He was now facing his dead mother and watching his past self amble about the room.

"I killed her."

"Harry. Harry. Harry. Look what you've done."

"I didn't do this! I couldn't have! She's already dead."

"After all your mother did to protect you, you killed her."

"But-but- I couldn't have! She was already dead!"

Harry fell to his knees, tears leaking from his eyes. The wise, old Tristram stared down at him, head shaking. A movement stirred in front of him. Harry looked up, his vision blurred.

Lily Potter was standing up and looking directly at him, green eyes blazing.

Suddenly, her features sharpened. Just as quickly, they dulled and faded and there was Hermione standing in front of him.

He rushed to her and pulled her into his arms.

"Harry, how could you kill her?" she said as he held her limp form.

"Hermione-you have to believe me. I didn't! I didn't kill her!"

"Oh, Harry, I loved you so much, but I can't anymore. You killed her, you killed her!"

And Hermione died in his arms. He felt her body waste away and she was gone.

"Harry, you have destroyed the one who meant the most to you. You have killed your best friend and your mother. How can you call yourself good? Can't you see how dark you are? What a dark soul you have?"

"I'm-I'm not evil. I didn't kill them. I never meant to."

Chapter Eight: Dreams and Diamond Dust

The scream awakened the entire IMS house. Within moments, everyone had made his or her way to Harry and Hermione's room. Hermione was standing by the couch where Harry lay, staring at him wide eyed with her hand clasped to her mouth. Harry was screaming and shaking in his sleep. Hermione reached down to wake him, but Arabella stopped her.

"Just wait Hermione."

After another blood curdling scream, Harry shot up and looked around bewildered. He saw Hermione first.

"I didn't do it! It wasn't me! She was already dead!"

Arabella reached a hand down and stopped the boy's terrifying shivers. "Harry, take a deep breath. What happened?"

Slowly and shakily, Harry shared his dream with the class. Through the stunned silence, a few of the girls shed tears at the horrific scene that was being played out in their own minds. Hermione and Arabella had both sunk to the couches as Harry told his story.

"Has anyone here ever had a dream like this?"

Nine heads shook from side to side.

"Eight of you grew up in the wizarding world hearing Harry's name for as long as you can remember. Since the time when you were very small, you have heard tales of the defeat of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and the scar on the forehead of the young boy. Does anyone know about a curse scar?"

"Curse scars only occur when a very powerful, very Dark magic has been performed. Harry's scar is a link to Voldemort and it hurts him when Voldemort is feeling especially vicious or when Voldemort wants Harry to see something," Hermione muttered quietly, avoiding Harry's looks.

The group was stunned. Arabella went further to explain about the dreams that Harry had had in the past. She went to great depths to explain what happened the Halloween night.

"Dreams are the purest form of Divination. It is very rare that you have a person that can see the future in their dreams. Harry, we believe, can do this. We also know that dreams are a great form of communication. They allow us to see things we wouldn't normally be exposed to," Arabella explained Harry's dream about the killing of the Muggle gardener at the Riddle House in Little Hangleton.

Harry sighed as he settled into his bed. The impromptu three o'clock in the morning lesson had served the purpose of completely wearing him out. Arabella had talked for half an hour about dreams, ending her lecture with, of course, more research assignments. Harry was beginning to get very comfortable with the Hogwarts library.

The following morning, Harry, Hermione and Ginny were in the library at eight o'clock. Harry had not been able to get to bed the previous night and had spent a good four and a half hours translating Hermione's book. He hadn't even begun to read the overly large text but caught occasional references to four keys to something. Harry noticed that this phrase was not used often; he felt that if the words had been spoken, they would have been whispered and feared. Something was very odd about the book that Harry couldn't quite place.

"Apparently, dreams are related to a form of mind control. The fact that Voldemort can control Harry's dreams shows that Voldemort does exercise some element of control over Harry. There's mention of dreams being a key, but the book doesn't explain that any further," Hermione said, after she had placed a book into the 'studied' stack to her left, which was slowly but surely growing.

"Ooh, this sounds interesting. There's an incantation that allows the caster to actually enter someone's dreams. Not them, but enter them," Ginny pointed to a paragraph in the volume she was perusing. Hermione leaned across the table to get a better look.

"This might be good to learn. Maybe then if Harry has another one of these dreams, we could go into his head and see it."

"I'd really prefer it if you guys didn't do that. My dreams are pretty scary."

"Harry, that reminds me, did you write the dream down?"

"Of course."

"May I see what you have, both for this dream and the one you had over the summer?" Hermione asked.

"I guess so," Harry responded as he pulled out a journal from his rucksack. Handing it to Hermione, his hand brushed hers and she jerked away slightly at his touch. It went unnoticed by Ginny, who was using a highlighting spell to copy important facts from the book.

Harry took just a few moments to read his descriptions before she went about writing something on a piece of parchment. Suddenly, she jumped up and ran to a deeper section of the library.

When she returned moments later, she was carrying another book. She slammed it onto the table, which emitted a groan under the fifteen or so heavy books already stacked there.

“Harry, listen to this. I came across this for the Ancient Prophecies reading I did at the beginning of the block. It’s rather unrelated but it was mentioned in a prophecy, so I did a little background research.”

She flipped the book opened and pointed to a paragraph.

Magical studies of the mind have revealed many curious points. Perhaps one of the most interesting facts that magiscientists have found is that all magical beings share a common mindset. It has been taught to the most powerful witches and wizards of our world that they must secure a place within their own minds that they can retreat to if necessary. From birth, the place exists in every magical mind; one only must know where to look to find it. It has often been theorized that there exist other places within the mind.

We know of the land of joy, which is different for every witch and wizard. However, there are other lands, lands that are common to every being. These are the lands of sorrow, of love, and of magic. Both the lands of love and magic can be accessed by certain, key means.

Terre de L'amour is accessible by two minds joined as one and is from the heart. No description is possible of this place for it has been seen only by few and those few do not wish to share this experience with just anyone.

Terre de la Magie is accessible only by one whose powers are truly in tune with the Natural Powers and come from deep within the soul. Theoretically, it is only a magus that has the ability to find this place. Since only a few magi have ever existed, it is not known what the Land of Magic is like.

Terre de la Douleur resides solely in the mind. It has been described as a dreadful place, a warped view of our own world. In order to reach this world, the mind must be sent there. This can be done either in one’s own head or by another person controlling a mind.

“Hermione, I would never send my self to Terre de la Douleur.”

“I know. That’s what caught me off guard about your dream. Terre de la Douleur is a very dark place. It is where those who have endured the Cruciatus or Imperious curses often reside. Harry, if you didn’t will yourself there, then how did you get there?”

Ginny, Hermione and Harry sat in stunned silence at this latest revelation. They would have contemplated until someone formulated a plausible answer had Hermione not noticed the time.

“We’re going to be late!” All three pulled the books into their bags and apparated back to IMS.

Arabella was seated in the common room, looking rather anxious. "Everyone, take your seats, we have something very important to discuss today."

The other students sat in the comfortable chairs and couches of the common room, content that they would be having class here instead of in the classroom.

"Before you were old enough to remember, our world was cloaked in evil. Terror, massacres, purges, and very strange disappearances were not rare. I'm sure a few of you know the horror of these acts. However, as part of our program, I want you to see where they took place. The Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, Viridian Ellsworth and I will be taking you on three field trips this year. The first will be the day before Halloween. The second will be on Valentine's Day and we have a surprise for you over Easter. The day before Halloween, we will be apparating to Wales for a visit to Godric's Hollow."

Slowly, nine heads turned to look at Harry, who faced them all with a very noncommittal look on his face, "That should be interesting," he said, causing more than one mouth to drop open in surprise.

Arabella continued their discussion on dreams from the previous night. Once Hermione had shared the information about Terre de la Douleur, the entire class jumped to life.

"Is there some sort of charm that can force that sort of mental movement?" asked Akilah.

"Not that I know. It would have to be very powerful, dark, ancient magic. Anything like that would be so controlled and possibly illegal. I smell some more research. However, this time, I'd like you to go to the library in Diagon Alley. There's more extensive information on Old Magic there. Which reminds me, I have something for you," with a flick of her wand, slips of parchments appeared in everyone's hands. "Those are your passes to the Restricted Section. Use them wisely."

Work then began on the interpretation of dreams. Harry's dreams were studied at length, but nothing could be found of interest. There seemed to be no symbolic meaning to anything in them. Not even Terre de la Douleur had meaning, it was simply a place.

So the day went and when classes ended, Harry cornered Ginny, "I miss you, you know. How about dinner in Hogsmeade just the two of us?"

Ginny looked more than a little relieved as she accepted. It had been quite awhile since they had spent any time alone together.

Harry explained to Hermione, who looked happy to have some time to herself and met Ginny in the Entrance Hall. After a few steps outside the doors, they both apparated to a nice, quiet pub in Hogsmeade.

Ginny had selected the restaurant. It was off the main street and didn't draw the school crowds of the Three Broomsticks. When they walked in, Harry was immediately warmed after the walk through the brisk October air. It was a quiet, dark room that smelled of something delicious.

“Good evening. How many will be dining tonight?” said a distinguished gentleman, who was standing just to the left of the door.

“Just two,” answered Ginny.

They were lead to a table in the corner of the small room. After being given menus, Harry and Ginny were left alone.

“Have you talked to Ron?” asked Ginny.

“No, I haven’t seen him since last night. Have you talked to him?”

“Of course, he’s completely torn up. I went to the Gryffindor common room during lunch. I guess he didn’t go to classes today, just sat in the common room in his pyjamas, being very moody.”

“Did he say anything about Hermione?”

“Oh yes, he moaned and groaned about how he really did love her and it just wasn’t fair that it didn’t work out and how he really had hoped that it would. It was pitiful actually. I told him that he needs to stand up, take a shower, put on some robes and do something with himself. So he did just that and we took a flight around the pitch.”

“I’m glad you got him out and about. I was going to see if he wanted to play chess tomorrow after class, maybe talk to him a bit, see if he won’t open up.”

“Just be very careful. He’s very quick to anger right now.”

Harry nodded as the waiter came to take their orders. Harry was rather surprised by the waiter, as it was a rarity in the wizarding world. Usually the orders were placed directly into the plate and the food appeared when it was ready. Ginny found the gesture rather quaint and was positively giggly by the end of the meal.

“We better head back, we have a Quidditch practice tonight.”

“Actually, Angelina cancelled it. It’s going to be tomorrow night.”

“Why’d she cancel it?”

“More than likely so that she could snog George all night,” Ginny answered without batting an eye.

Harry nearly choked on his pumpkin juice, “Really?”

“Oh, of course. Really, Harry, do you have any idea what’s going on in Gryffindor? You are a prefect after all.”

“Oh, but it’s just gossip. Nothing serious to worry about it.”

“You should still know what’s going on.”

“Yes, well...”

They finished their dinner in relative silence, occasionally commenting on the weather or the Quidditch season. When the cheque came, Harry left a few galleons on the table to cover it and they headed back to Hogwarts.

Hermione was waiting for Harry in their dorm room. She looked up at him as he came in, her tears still evident.

“Ron sent me a letter.”

“Did you read it?”

“No. I tore it up and sent it back.”

“Why?”

“Oh, Harry. I couldn’t bear to read it. Then I might go back to him and that’s the last thing I want to do.”

“Hermione, why would you do that?”

“Well, I’m sure that’s what the letter was about. I don’t want to be with him anymore, Harry. It’s just not worth it.”

“What if he’s just trying to be friends?”

“Oh, I need time. We can’t just pretend as if nothing ever happened. You know it doesn’t work that way.”

Harry had no idea how it worked, but just nodded. He took the break in the conversation to look over Hermione. She was wearing some sort of sweatpants and a hooded sweatshirt. Harry had never seen these clothes before and was surprised that Hermione was wearing them. She was usually quite particular about her outfits. The blanket wrapped around her was an old one. It had tattered and frayed edges and looked very well, Harry drew a blank before stumbling on the right word, loved. Judging by its state, Harry guessed the blanket was from her childhood and a wave of sadness washed over him. Harry had no stuffed animals or blankets from his childhood. His uncle had fought him tooth and nail to keep such niceties away from him.

Hermione shivered, “Harry?”

“Hmm?”

“Can I have a hug?”

He gathered her up into a tight hug. She tightened her grip on him as the tears began to flow once more.

“Hermione, why are you crying?”

“I just feel so...alone.”

“You’ll never be alone. I’ll always be here, Hermione.” To pick of the pieces when your world falls apart and to hold your hand when your heart is broken. Always. Harry thought to himself as she shuddered against him.

He led her into her room and tucked her into the bed before wishing her goodnight. Once back in the living room, Harry picked up the book that he had spent the week translating and began to leaf through it. As he skimmed his highlighted points, he began noticing a very strange pattern. The phrase ‘four keys’ seemed to be repeated quite often, but whenever it was mentioned, a completely unrelated topic followed it. It was as if something was preventing the author from saying too much about the keys, whatever they were. Promising himself that he’d show Hermione in the morning, Harry chanced a glance at the clock and found that it was much later than he thought.

Suddenly realizing that he was very tired, Harry set aside the book and headed into his dorm room.

“Order! Please quiet down! I mean it! Everyone! SHUT UP!” shouted Katie Bell, Hogwarts Head Girl. The twenty-two Prefects in the room looked startled at her outburst and immediately sat a little straighter in their chairs. Even Roger Davies, Head Boy, flinched at her shouts.

“The first meeting of the Hogwarts Prefects is now in session. For the new prefects, I would like to explain the system a bit to you. We will have a Prefects Meeting every six weeks. These meetings will begin at eight thirty sharp and will finish when I’m bloody well done with you. We will discuss any announcements or business during these meetings, as well as vote on any decisions that affect the school. The teachers must make the final decision, but the process starts here. All right, now that’s out of the way, I’d like to talk a little about the charms we’ve been using lately. There are what, seven of us, that are in IMS and we were all given mirror charms so that we may check out the common rooms at all times. How does everyone feel this is working out?”

All twenty-two prefects were far too terrified to answer. Finally Cho spoke up, “They’re wonderful, they really are. I can keep an eye on things and speak with Roger if I need too. It’s very easy to use.”

“Very well, Cho, I agree. However, more specifically, how do the rest of you feel?”

“Oh, fine.”

“Works great.”

“Never better.”

“Swell.”

The positive responses echoed in the room as Katie narrowed her eyes and turned from face to face. Apparently satisfied, she ploughed ahead. “Alright, this is our largest order of business tonight and it requires a vote. As you know, the wizarding world has experienced some rather Dark occurrences lately. As a result, Professor McGonagall, Madam Hooch, Roger and myself have discussed the possibility of temporarily suspending all Quidditch activity. The teachers feel that it may be too dangerous to have so many children out and about at one time. McGonagall asked if I would take a vote. All in favour of suspending Quidditch activities until further notice, please hold up a blue wand, all against hold up a red.”

Harry held up his wand, realizing it was already turning red. Hermione’s was blue, as were several others around the table. It was a marginal vote, but until further notice, Quidditch was cancelled and Harry Potter, for one, was livid.

It was apparent that a few others were as well, and Harry strongly suspected that once the rest of the students found out, it was not going to be a pretty picture.

As Harry and Ginny entered the Great Hall the following morning, a small mob had developed just outside. Nearly the entire student body was crowded around a notice tacked to the wall.

ATTENTION HOGWARTS STUDENTS

UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE, ALL QUIDDITCH GAMES AND PRACTICES ARE CANCELLED. THE QUIDDITCH SEASON WILL RESUME WHEN IT IS DEEMED SAFE TO CONTINUE.

Harry had seriously underestimated the students. They were angry all right; in fact they were nearly rebellious. A group of fourth year Slytherins was discussing a petition while a different group consisting of seven years from all four houses were planning a staged protest. It was Hermione who put an end to all the discussion. With a few swift flicks of her wand, she was floating in the centre of the hall, head and shoulders above the tallest people in the room.

"I want everyone to stop the bickering and protesting right now! The Prefects and Hogwarts Staff have excellent reasons for postponing the season and it is a little uncouth of you to be protesting this. There are escaped convicts on the loose, a Dark wizard is planning to kill one of your classmates and you have pretty heavy course loads, can't you think of anything besides Quidditch?"

If Hermione had been expecting unparalleled support, she must have certainly been surprised by the waves of laughter that descended on the group. Everyone shook their heads, tutting and laughing as they made their way into the Great Hall.

Harry watched as Hermione brought herself back down to the ground. Slightly apprehensive to her reaction, Harry was not a little surprised to see her laughing, "Well, at least they shut up," she chortled, turning to head into breakfast.

Harry just shook his head, wondering what exactly was happening to the world.

Arabella portkeyed them to the library in Diagon Alley. Hermione looked around anxiously at the rows and rows of dusty books, floor after floor filled with the neat, filled shelves. The entire group moved to the Divination section, where they immediately began work on the parchments laid out on all the tables. All one had to do was write the subject they were looking for and they were directed immediately to the shelf where those books were located. Harry thought this was rather like the Muggle computer systems, but when he mentioned this, Hermione was the only one who had a clue. Quickly, they set to work, Hermione and Harry retrieving stack after stack of books on Dream Spells.

"Oi! Listen to this. This spell, it's called, err.. Hermione, how do you say this?" Ginny pointed to a word in the text.

"Tessitore di sogno."

"Right. Ok, apparently, this spell puts whomever its cast onto into an unending sleep. Only once the spell is broken does the person wake up."

"That's a good one. Put that down," The list of sleeping and dream spells was steadily growing. By three o'clock, they have nearly four feet of parchment filled with dream spells that the entire class had done research on. A little timer went off, signifying that their portkeys were active so that they could return to Hogwarts.

Arabella was waiting. "The next hour will be a practical lesson. Hermione, give me the scroll."

For the next hour, Harry was put in and out of sleep by different spells. Hermione was, of course, an excellent castor and Harry finished the lesson feeling surprisingly refreshed.

"Oh, a reminder. We will be leaving for Godric's Hollow tomorrow night at eighty-thirty sharp."

Eight-thirty came much faster than Harry would have preferred. At about eight-twenty five, the ten students of IMS were standing in the common room, dressed head to toe in black, as they had been directed.

Without a word, Arabella lead them all out to the Entrance Hall. Once they had walked outside, Harry noticed all of their brooms lined up against a wall. They mounted them and followed Arabella off of the school grounds.

About forty-five minutes later, they started their descent.

Harry nearly fell off of his broom. The area around Godric's Hollow was exactly as he'd pictured it in his dream. The aerial view showed a small village that looked like something out of a colonial American history textbook. The landed at the edge of the village, which felt quiet and deserted. As Harry looked around, his mind pulled in the detail. The village was nearly in ruins.

All of the glass windows had been blown out and the doors on all of the quaint little houses and stores had been torn from their frames. There were smoke stains on much of the exterior walls and a chill had descended upon the town. As the last ray of sun dipped behind the hills in the distance, Harry immediately felt a sense of foreboding come over him as the temperature of the surrounding area lessened many degrees.

A blast sounded and a scene played out in front of the group that none of them would ever forget.

The smell of burning flesh wafted through the area as ghost like flames burst through the windows in each of the colonial buildings. Screams rang through the air, chilling to the bone. Then Harry turned at the approaching footsteps.

A young woman ran out of the nearest building, silvery blood dripping from her slit throat. She ran and fell a few feet in front of the group. The ghost of a wizard cloaked in dark robes and wearing a strange mask followed her, issuing spells with his wand. The ghosts of the spells floated in the air.

Another scream further down as an entire family was herded out onto the street. A group of what Harry now guessed were the ghosts of Death Eaters surrounded the family, leveraging curse after curse. Slowly, the family died until the youngest child, a girl who once would have had blond hair and sparkling blue eyes, remained. She huddled on the street, clutching a tattered teddy bear. A small wizard separated himself from the group and put the Killing Curse on the young witch, who fell without a sound.

Hermione and Ginny huddled close to Harry, watching the terror unfold. Suddenly an alarm went off and a group of ministry aurors descended upon the villages, sending curses and countercurses at the Death Eaters running every which way. Out of the mists of screaming villagers, running death eaters and aurors, came a sole voice, ringing clearly in the night air.

"La morte è la peste che distrugg questo villaggio del terrore."

A beam of light blacker than the blackest night emerged into the sky and ghostly flames surrounded the village perimeter. As quickly as the village had erupted in terror, it became enveloped in silence. Every Death Eater that had been running fell where they stood and every villager as well. Even the one who had cast the spell, collapsed.

The ghostly images disappeared with the flames. Silence fell upon the quiet grove.

Ginny and Hermione huddled together, weeping. Every one, save Draco and Harry were standing together, holding onto one another and crying from sheer terror. Even Arabella was crying silently.

Her cool voice broke the silence, "What you have seen are the terrors of Halloween night, or more specifically after one AM on November First. After Voldemort disappeared, the Death Eaters stormed the village of Godric's Hollow. It is unknown who cast that spell, the Darkest spell ever created, but the magic was powerful enough to cause the ghostly replay of this scene for one week around Halloween every year. You have seen the Darkest terror imaginable. This is the epitome of the Death Eater creed. There was no excuse, no reason and no purpose was served. It was evil, purely. You will never read about this event in your school textbooks or hear it talked about in the street, for it is unmentionable. There is no memorial for these people, as this entire area is cursed. One cannot be built. It is only through the memories of these people that they are remembered. This is what we are fighting against, the Darkness around us and the Darkness inside ourselves, for never will our world be truly free from evil until we can prevent something like this from ever happening again."

Arabella mounted her broom and the others did the same. Silence pervaded on the way home.

The fright and silence in IMS was tangible. No one made a sound without causing someone else to jump and look over his or her shoulder. In a daze, everyone made his or her way to bed, but no one slept.

Harry sat up in bed the next morning when the first rays of sun shone in through his window. He dressed quietly and found his broom.

Hermione was sitting in the living room as if she was waiting for him. She too had her broom and together they made their way outside for a morning flight, which would eventually become a tradition for them. They were silent as they flew around the grounds, looped over the Forbidden Forest and down to Hogsmeade where they met a large group of Gryffindors at nine o'clock.

It was the traditional Halloween trip to Hogsmeade. Ginny and the rest of the Gryffindors who had been to Godric's Hollow were mostly silent at first, but as the unusually warm October sun began to shine brightly and warm everything it touched, their moods lifted. By the afternoon, everyone was laughing and carrying on, as they should be.

"Ooh, Hermione, look at the time, we really must be off," Ginny said, lifting Harry's arm to check the watch that he had purchased that day.

"Right, lots of getting ready to do for tonight."

Ginny winked at Harry and he noticed Hermione nodding to Neville. During their morning flight, the only thing said had been when Hermione had told him she was going with Neville, but just as friends.

Harry nodded to the girls who avoided Ron's glare as they left the Three Broomsticks. The other girls in the group followed, leaving Dean, Seamus, Ron, Harry, and Neville to themselves.

"So, who is everyone going with tonight?" Harry asked lightly.

"Dean is going with Parvati, I'm going with Lavender and Seamus is going with Dagny."

"Is that the witch you were with in Hogsmeade the other day?"

"Yes, she's in Gryffindor, our year."

"I know. I just couldn't quite place her name," Harry said, noticing that Neville was shifting uncomfortably under the hard, cruel gaze of Ron. Harry changed subjects to the upcoming Quidditch championships, which automatically brought a much lighter tone to the group.

Harry straightened his robes one more time, fiddling with the clasp at his neck once more. He was wearing the same robes that he had to the Yule Ball last year and they had been a little short. He opted for a lengthening charm, as he wanted to save the new dark silver robes for the Christmas ball.

Leaving his room, he found Hermione frantically rushing through the living room towards the bathroom. She had done something to her hair, making it fall in very long ringlets. She noticed him and with a wave of her hand, darkness appeared in front of Harry's eyes.

"Sorry Harry, but you're not allowed to see me yet!" She tossed at him as she entered the bathroom.

"Err.. Hermione, is this going to wear off at any point?"

"Give it five minutes or so."

Harry slumped on what he hoped was the couch, thinking that the temporary loss of his sight was a little harsh, couldn't she have just told him not to look?

"Alright, I'm ready. Finite Incantatem," she said, lifting the spell off of Harry.

He blinked several time and turned behind him. Hermione was standing in the doorway of the bathroom in a set of deep purple dress robes. Her skin and robes and hair glistened with what could only be described as diamond dust. The curly ringlets

were pulled up on top of her head and cascaded down to frame her face. She was grinning broadly at Harry's stunned statement.

"So, do I look ok?"

He let out a choked laugh as he walked to her, "You look amazing. All the other guys will be infuriatingly jealous of Neville, I promise."

"Even you?"

He avoided her question, "I have to go meet Ginny. I'll see you at the ball," and he swished from the room, his robes billowing behind him.

He knocked on the door to Ginny's room and Cadence answered, dressed in her pyjamas, "What? Couldn't settle on a lucky fellow to escort you, so you decided to stay in?"

"Oh, Harry, how you do go on. Let me get Ginny for you," she responded, giggling the entire way to Ginny's room.

Before Cadence had the chance to knock, Ginny opened the door and stepped from her room. Her dress robes were simple and elegant, the lavender colour bringing out her skin tones. She smiled at him and Harry moved to hug her. She allowed him to embrace her and pulled back to look at his robes. He absentmindedly fingered her soft auburn curls as she kissed him on the lips, at the same time straightening out his robes and adjusting the clasp.

"There, now you're perfect."

"You look amazing Gin."

"Thank you."

He offered her his arm and they walked slowly to the Great Hall.

As was the usual fair, pumpkins were hanging in the air of the Great Hall. A great storm was brewing on the ceiling and candles eerily floated just above the tables. The only light came from the thousands of candles and the occasional flash of lightening on the ceiling.

Harry spotted Hermione and Neville seated at a far table and he and Ginny slowly made their way over to the table. A few minutes after they were seated, Harry noticed Ron, who was making his way over with Lavender attached to his arm.

"Hey Harry, Ginny, Neville. Good evening Hermione, you look nice."

"So do you Ron, Lavender, I like your robes," Hermione answered coolly, tightening her grip on the napkin she was holding.

"Your hair looks wonderful, how did you get it to that?" Lavender asked, keeping her gaze down.

The small talk continued, Harry growing more uncomfortable as each second passed. When he thought he was about to die, Professor Dumbledore rose from his spot at the teacher's table and cleared his throat.

"Let the feast begin," he said cheerfully.

The food appeared on the small round tables, just as it did during normal feasts. The conversation turned to other topics and Harry was thankful that there was no more small talk.

After several courses, the plates returned to their original sparkling cleanliness and the lights that had brightened during dinner dimmed somewhat.

A few chords of a song rang out in the darkened hallway and the voice of popular songstress Celestina Warbeck rang out in the Great Hall. Chairs scraped as couples began to hurry to the dance floor, anxious to enjoy the music. Ginny pulled Harry from his chair.

"But I don't dance, Ginny."

"It'll be fine, I'll teach you," and with that she made one final tug on his arms and whisked him onto the dance floor.

He immediately crunched all five toes on her left foot.

She cringed and laughed and continued the lessons. Hermione and Neville soon joined them, dancing just a few feet away and keeping ample distance between themselves.

As the slow songs started, Neville asked Ginny for a dance and she obliged, leaving Harry and Hermione to themselves.

"Are you having fun Mione?"

"As much fun as a girl can have who's with a guy she doesn't like all that much."

"Neville's an ok bloke."

"Don't get me wrong, Neville is a great guy, but honestly, he's a tad boring. Are you having fun?"

"Of course, Ginny is a great dancer."

"Harry, you're not so bad yourself, you really aren't."

She pillowed her head on his shoulder and he pulled her closer, watching Ginny and Neville out of the corner of his eye. Was she flirting with him? Ginny certainly

appeared to be, she was giggling at everything he was whispering in her ear and they were standing awfully close. Harry shrugged it off and turned his view to Ron and Lavender who looked like they were trying to stand as close together as they could without looking like they were standing too close together. Ron was whispering in her ear and she would occasionally kiss him on the cheek or brush her fingers on the side of his face. Harry did his best to keep Hermione so that her back faced them.

"They're all over each other aren't they Harry?"

"Who?"

"Oh, don't play stupid. It's only a matter of time before they end up together you know."

"Hermione, stop worrying about Ron. It's not doing you any good. Concentrate on something else, anything else."

"Oh, I just can't. Harry, more than anything, my pride hurts."

"I know. I know," he said quietly as he pulled her into a hug. The glances from both Ginny and Ron caused him to pull away and resume his previous position.

Harry, Hermione and Ginny stumbled back to the IMS common room at two o'clock in the morning, attempting, but most likely failing miserably to keep themselves covered by the Invisibility Cloak. The feast had ended at eleven o'clock and they'd gone back to Gryffindor Tower for the after party.

Many of the younger students had already gone to bed, so the mulled mead, red currant rum or Ogden's Firewhiskey did not surprise Harry. At around one thirty, the girls of Gryffindor has astounded every male in the room by having a drinking contest, which Ginny was very proud to be the winner of. Harry, having only taken a few shots of Firewhiskey got the exciting job of taking the stumbling, giggling, drunken Ginny and Hermione home. Hermione had only taken a few drinks of the rum and had nearly passed out. Ginny, however, was doing lovely after having a nice visit to the bathroom.

The IMS common room was completely deserted and Harry left Hermione at the door to their room first. He walked Ginny to her room and made sure she was safely in the hands of Cadence, who was still awake, before heading back to his own room.

Not surprisingly, Hermione was tucked into his bed. *Oh, sod what anyone thinks*, he thought to himself as he climbed into the bed, pushing Hermione over.

Chapter Nine: The Black Void

The IMS classroom was empty save two people. The other eight students had finished their exam on Divination and left the classroom. Only Harry Potter and Cho Chang remained. Cho finished her test first and as soon as she had dotted her last sentence, she muttered something and the parchment disappeared. Instead of leaving, she sat and waited.

As soon as Harry had finished, his parchment disappeared and he gathered his things.

"Harry, could I talk to you?"

He had worked the entire term so far to avoid having the conversation he knew was coming. Somehow managing to push aside all feelings and thoughts of Cedric, he had been living happily and nightmare free for a few months and couldn't shake the feeling that it was all about to come crashing back down. "Sure, Cho, what's up?"

They walked together to the door of the classroom before she spoke again, "I wanted to talk to you about Cedric."

"Um, what about Cedric?"

"I don't know if you knew this or not, but we were going out at the end of last year."

How could he have not known? "Right. I knew that."

"Well, when Cedric, you know, passed, I wanted to blame you. I knew you liked me and I couldn't help but thinking that his death was partially your fault."

This is a nightmare.

"Now, I can look back on the situation and see it objectively, Harry. I know it's not your fault and I'm sorry that I ever believed that it was."

"Erm. Thank you. I'm glad you don't think that it's my fault."

"Thanks for talking to me Harry."

"Anytime," he nodded to her as she turned to go into her dorm. *That was the weirdest experience of my life. Okay, maybe not the weirdest, but still... definitely the most awkward.*

Hermione was waiting for him in the living room, a worried look on her face. "We've been called to Dumbledore's office."

"For what?"

"The letter didn't say."

Harry's look matched Hermione's for every degree of worry. He dropped his stuff in the living room and they decided to walk to Dumbledore's office.

"Pumpkin pasty," Hermione muttered when they reached the gargoyle.

They waited for the staircase to deliver them to the door instead of rushing up the steps. Harry knocked once and the door opened slowly.

"Harry, Hermione, I'm glad you're here. If you and Ron would just follow me..." Dumbledore motioned towards the wall to the left of his desk. As the group neared the wall, a portion of it slid to the side, revealing a stone corridor. They walked down several sets of stairs before coming to an ancient wooden door. Dumbledore slid his finger down the door and Harry was reminded very much of Vault 713 at Gringotts...

The door opened on its hinges without so much as a creak. They entered a lavish looking suite. Immediately across the room was a large fireplace, flanked by filled bookcases. Two large armchairs sat in front of the fire with a table between them. One wall was completely made of windows and looked over the edge of the mountain that Hogwarts was perched upon. Several doors opened off the main room. One of the doors opened and Harry's aunt walked into the room.

"Hello Harry, Hermione. It's good to see you," she said as she kissed them both on their cheeks.

"Hey! I know you! You're that actress that disappeared a long time ago. I thought Voldemort killed you!" Ron said, looking at the young woman.

"Mr. Weasley, why don't you have a seat? I'm sure there are a few things that should be explained," Dumbledore said as he motioned towards another grouping of chairs by the windows. Suddenly, yet another door burst open. Harry turned in his chair and had never felt a greater sense of relief. Sirius Black and Remus Lupin had just rushed into the room. Sirius quickly made his way to Amarante and kissed her soundly on the lips. Harry did a double take as his aunt blushed.

"What in the hell is going on here?" said Ron, looking between Sirius and Ami.

Before Dumbledore could answer, Rachel and Richard Granger walked into the room, both greeting Hermione. Even before Ron had the chance to protest, the door that Harry, Hermione and Ron had come through slid open once more and Arabella walked into the room. She immediately rushed to Remus, who gathered her into his arms with a very audible sigh of relief.

"Mr. Weasley, sit down! We have some very important things to discuss and we cannot waste time by having you throwing a fit," Dumbledore commanded Ron, who had jumped out of his chair.

"To my left is Amarante Evans, sister of Lily Evans Potter and aunt to Harry. She took on the guise of Petunia Dursley as a protection for Harry, which I'm sure he'll be happy to explain in great detail at a later time. Drs. Richard and Rachel Granger are really Hermione's parents."

“So you’ve been living as muggles?” asked Ron, turning to Hermione’s parents.

“Yes, since before you all were born,” answered Rachel.

“Did Harry and Hermione know all of this?”

“But Professor Dumbledore, how can we see them?” Hermione questioned, ignoring Ron.

“Here, the Fidelius Charm does not work, for there is not a safer place than Hogwarts. I assure you, no evil can come upon them while they are here.”

“Alright, then why are they here? And Remus and Sirius, shouldn’t they be in hiding?” Harry gestured towards the two men sitting on the opposite side of the table.

“As you know, we cannot expect the ministry to help us in our silent war against Voldemort. Minister Connelly seems a bit reluctant to fully acknowledge Voldemort and the Wizards’ Council seems no closer to admitting that he’s back. During the Dark Years, we reinstated an ancient Order that consisted of Severus Snape, Lily and James Potter, Richard and Rachel Granger, Ami Evans, Sirius Black, Arabella Figg, Remus Lupin and Narcissa Malfoy.”

The trio’s mouths dropped in shock.

“Narcissa? Narcissa Malfoy? As in the wife of Dude Who is Really Evil, Lucius Malfoy?” Ron questioned.

Sirius snickered, “Of course, Narcissa. She’s a true Gryffindor. Good old Lucius figured she’d been put in Gryffindor by mistake, still doesn’t know that she’s a Light witch.”

“Of course, I am not in the Order, for it works better in even numbers and even better when it consists of couples,” Remus and Arabella both blushed, “This group was particularly tight knit during school, even Severus tolerated everyone because of Narcissa. They’d have done anything to protect each other. This past year, we have been working our hardest to strengthen our network. Next year, we will make a new team induction, to replace Lily and James. You three, particularly Harry and Hermione, have already begun your training. Are you ready to help in the fight against Voldemort?”

The trio nodded.

“Excellent. Today, I brought you down here to discuss the operation with you in greater detail and to begin preparing you for your training, which may begin as early as next year. The important thing that you all must keep in mind is that you must stay together. Your strength is what will keep you alive.”

“But, Professor, how can-“

“Another day, Miss Granger, another day.”

Each member took turns describing his or her role in the Order. As they spoke, Harry began to see in his mind a very intricate, yet delicate web created to destroy the Dark Arts. As they discussed the past, Harry realized that they created a very formidable group; all of them were extraordinarily powerful.

It was Hermione who interrupted, “This sounds very elegant and mysterious, but what do you plan to do right now? There are plans for down the road, but I see a group composed of two wanted ‘murderers’, the wife of Voldemort’s most feared Death Eater, a spy who is supposed to be a Death Eater and three people who supposedly no longer exist. You have a lot banking on uncertainty.”

“Ms. Granger, I appreciate your concern and commend you on picking up how much of our mission relies on luck, but I’m afraid we have to go that route, for there is no other way. As far as Sirius and Remus go, the three of you must go on acting like you have. Ms. Granger, I heard your use of the term ‘escaped convicts-“ Hermione blushed “and it was a good cover-up. Ami, Rick, Rachel, Narcissa, they all have their own roles and obligations. You cannot worry about what the others are doing, you can only worry about yourselves.”

This satisfied Hermione and the meeting drew to a close. Ami escorted Harry, Ron and Hermione back to Dumbledore’s office. She gave Harry and Hermione very tight hugs, wishing them luck and shook Ron’s hand before turning back to the war room, as Harry had begun calling the chamber.

The walk back to Gryffindor Tower was silent, with Harry sandwiched between the estranged couple. Harry and Hermione dropped Ron off and as soon as the portrait had swung closed and Hermione began cursing rather loudly, much to Harry’s surprise.

“Hermione, can you do that with a Quaffle?”

“Oh stuff it, Harry. I can’t believe they’d even consider letting Ron into the Order! He’s the most unstable person I know.”

“You mustn’t worry about it. They have their reasons for everything.”

“I suppose you’re right, but honestly, Ronald Weasley, fighting evil...” she trailed off into a tirade under her breath.

Harry shook his head as he opened the door for Hermione who made a beeline for their dorm room.

Ginny stood up from her seat and walked over to Harry, greeting him with a hug. “Would you like to go for a flight tonight?” She whispered to him.

“Of course. Meet me here at 10:30.”

She nodded and let go of Harry. He walked back to his dorm room for a short nap.

At 10:30, Harry was standing in the common room, holding his Firebolt and the Invisibility Cloak. Ginny met up with him and they walked from the room arm in arm, heading towards the Astronomy Tower.

Harry had never been up to the Astronomy Tower when there wasn't a class and he was surprised to see a few couples hiding behind various cabinets or other objects.

"Ginny? Are there always this many couples up here?"

"Honestly, Harry, what do you think the Astronomy Tower is for?"

"I assumed star gazing."

"Darling, sometimes you're splendidly naive."

"What?"

"Never mind, Harry. Come on," she said as she tugged at his arm. They walked to the circular staircase and headed to the top of the Tower. The air outside was somewhat chilly, but luckily there was no wind.

Harry tilted his head back to look at the stars before mounting the broomstick. Ginny climbed on behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist. He took off at a leisurely pace, enjoying the brisk autumn air and the sparkling night sky. The higher they flew, the chillier the air and it wasn't long before Harry heard Ginny casting a warming spell over them. They soared high above the castle, the warm yellow lights seeming distant and cold.

Conversation was minimal; they were both enjoying the innate feeling that accompanied flight. When Harry began to feel the hard wood of the broomstick through his gloves, he dipped the broomstick and they alighted on top of the Tower.

Ginny hopped off of the broom and waited for Harry to dismount.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to stay out here and talk for awhile."

"Sure," Harry responded, resting the Firebolt against a wall.

They sat on the cold stone against the entrance to the Tower, close together and fingers intertwined.

Ginny was quiet for a long time before she spoke up, "Harry, did Hermione love Ron?"

"I think she still may, even though she's trying very hard to get over it."

"Oh."

"Why?"

“I was just wondering... I wonder what it’s like to be in love,” she said very softly.

Harry considered this for some time before responding, “I would imagine that it’s a lot like flying. With your heart beating and your senses clearer than ever. The exhilaration pumping through your bones and every vein in your body. It’s happy and sad and scared and content all at once.”

“I suppose,” and she fell silent again.

What felt like hours later, they were still sitting against the wall. Harry’s legs were long numb, from the cold and from not moving for a long time.

“Ginny, are you ready to go inside?”

“Wait, there—there was a reason I wanted to come up here tonight.”

“Well, I’m sure one of the couples have moved downstairs, we’ll go claim a cabinet,” he chided as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

She forced a quiet laugh, “No, it wasn’t that.”

“Ginny, is something wrong?”

“No, Harry, I feel like something is actually right.”

“Okay...”

“Harry. I-I love you.”

There was a very pregnant pause as Harry turned to look at her.

“Ginny, I’m flattered, and you mean a great deal to me, really. But I’m—we’re too young to be in love.”

The look on her face was heartbreaking, but Harry stood his ground. He couldn’t *wouldn’t* allow himself to fall in love with anyone. Not now, when it was too dangerous. She sighed and allowed Harry to pull her up off of the cold stone. He hugged her, “Ginny, I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” and she led the way downstairs, allowing Harry to put the Invisibility Cloak over her head.

“This is a theoretical course. Beginning right after Christmas, we will be beginning duelling and I can’t very well send you off to fight Death Eaters armed with Tickling Charms and *Wingardium Leviosa*, which by the way, is completely useless unless you’re battling feathers. Look forward to even more research and discussion this time around,” Arabella began her lecture at the very beginning of class. There were demonstrations of how magical theories worked, complex diagrams to learn for the

breaking down of spells, discussions of will over word, the building of hexes, and of course, notes upon notes about different types of charms, spells, and hexes.

By three o'clock, Harry's hand had taken a deformed claw shape and Hermione was beginning her second bottle of ink and a small mountain of parchment on her desk looked ready to come crashing down at any moment. Harry was starving, as their only lunch had been a wave of Arabella's wand that produced an ever-filling plate of sandwiches. There had been no time to eat and the sandwich on Harry's desk had been his first and there was only one bite taken out of it.

At four o'clock, Cadence collapsed on her desk. Arabella stopped abruptly.

"What time is it?"

"Around four o'clock."

"Already? Well, doesn't time fly when you're having fun?"

Ten very tired voices groaned in reply.

"Well, then off with you!" she ordered.

Everyone hastily gathered his or her things; terrified she would change her mind.

"Hermione, if you could just stay one moment,"

Ginny and Harry turned as well, waiting for their friend, "Go on, you two, she'll catch you up."

A few minutes later, Hermione had exited the classroom and was making her way across the common room towards the fireplace, where Harry and Ginny were sitting.

"What did Arabella need?" asked Harry, not looking up from his hand of cards.

"She said she needed my help in a demonstration of Monday, cast a simple spell that I didn't recognize and dismissed me."

"That seems strange."

"I'm not worried at all. I trust Arabella."

Hermione joined their game of Exploding Snap! until it was time for dinner. After they had eaten, Harry announced he was heading to Gryffindor. Both Hermione and Ginny looked at him suspiciously.

"Contrary to popular opinion, I am allowed to speak to Ron."

Neither girl responded, but Ginny did raise her eyebrows at him. Ignoring them both, Harry headed to meet Ron.

The red head was sitting next to the portrait of the Fat Lady.

“It might not be a good time to go in there. Neville is angry with you.”

“For what?”

“I’m not sure. Very strange of him if you ask me, but he does like Ginny.”

Harry blanched, “He likes Ginny?”

“Of course, has for ages.”

“My girlfriend?”

“That would be the one. Did something happen?”

Harry hesitated; after all, Ron’s temper lately had been volatile. “This probably isn’t the best place to talk.”

He didn’t miss the glint in Ron’s eye, but instead pulled his friend towards the entrance hall. The evening was chilly, but they both had their heavy winter cloaks and Harry figured it wouldn’t be too cold.

They reached the lake before Ron spoke up, “Did you hurt Ginny?”

“I think so.”

Harry could practically feel Ron gritting his teeth, “How?”

Realizing that if he told Ron the truth, he’d be better off, Harry quickly told Ron about what had happened at the Astronomy Tower.

After several silent minutes, Ron turned to face Harry, “I’m glad you were honest with her, otherwise I’d have to kill you because you’d definitely hurt her more.”

Harry was surprised, to say the least. Ron was never that calm or collected. “Ron, are you alright?”

“Hermione won’t read my letters.”

“I know, she told me.”

“What happened? Everything used to be so balanced between the three of us.”

“Well, you and Hermione started going out. And things changed because of school this year.”

“But I can’t help thinking that we should have survived that.”

“We have and we will. I trust our friendship enough that in the end, we’ll all be best friends again.”

“You really think so?”

“I know so. We’ve come too close to death together for it not to be true.”

Ron considered this before nodding. They continued their walk in silence.

“Neville really likes Ginny?”

“How have you not noticed this?”

“I guess I never thought about it. But I guess it makes sense,” Harry said. He tried shaking the feeling of uneasiness from his mind, but failed.

“Harry, don’t worry about it. It seems like you have nothing to worry about. Be confident that Ginny at least loves you.”

Harry didn’t miss the undertones, “She loved you, Ron. Maybe it just wasn’t meant to be.”

“But it would have been so perfect if it would have worked out. You could have dated Ginny and maybe you would have gotten married one day, and Hermione and I could have gotten married. We could have all lived next door to each other and our kids could have played together and it would have been perfect.”

“I see two problems with that theory, Ron.”

“What’s that?”

“One, we’re fifteen years old! You can’t worry about stuff like that when we’re this young. The second is that it wouldn’t have been perfect because you and Hermione would have been miserable. You would have fought all the time.”

“Maybe it is just our age, maybe it will work out someday.”

“Ron, it’s nice to hope, but you can’t set your dreams on it.”

Again silence met Harry’s ears as they made their way back to the castle. Harry was surprised that they had talked for over an hour. He left Ron at the stairs and turned back to IMS.

There was an owl perched on the coffee table when Harry entered his dorm room. It immediately flew to him. Harry untied the scrap of parchment from its leg and it immediately flew away without waiting for a reply.

There are a great many mysteries in this world. What happens to the soul of a man who loses it to the Dementor’s Kiss?

He had to reread the note five times before instinct took over and he ran to Hermione's room, throwing open the door as he came to it.

"Ahh!"

Immediately, he felt the temporary blindness, but not before he had caught a glimpse of Hermione changing for bed.

"Sorry-I'm-er..."

"Harry! Don't you ever knock! *Finite Incantatem.*"

She was now fully dressed and as red as Ron's hair. From the heat on his face, Harry figured he was about ten times redder.

"I'm sorry. I just got this letter--"

"So you thought you'd burst in my room? Honestly, don't you men ever think?" she said as she took the proffered parchment from him.

Her eyes grew wider as she reread the parchment several times. "What can this mean? Can it mean what I think it does?"

He looked into her chocolate eyes, not wishing to see what he did. The same worry, fear and suspicion that he felt in his own heart was mirrored there, "It couldn't be."

"Harry, when someone gets the Dementor's Kiss, they're dead. Dead."

They stood looking at each other for several moments, before Hermione dropped the parchment in her hand. Tentatively, she walked to him and he pulled her into a hug.

"Oh, Harry, I really thought this year could be normal."

"Hermione, nothing is ever normal," his words were hollow, because he wanted so badly to believe that that was true. He wanted nothing more however than for things to be normal.

She nodded against his shoulder and he could feel the wetness from her face seeping through his shirt.

"How was your talk with Ron?"

Harry sat her down on the couch and told her about the conversation with their best friend. At the end, her eyes were very bright.

"Does he really want us to be friends again?"

"Of course."

She considered this before her mind latched onto another part of the conversation, “Harry, what happened with Ginny?”

Rather nervously, he told her. Her reaction was nonexistent. She merely nodded her head, before lifting herself off of the couch.

“I’m going to bed, goodnight Harry.”

“Night Mione. If you need me-“

“I know, Harry, I know.”

Harry sat before the fire for many hours, thinking about his conversation with Ron and that night in the Astronomy Tower. He thought of the Order and what it meant. Without a trace of fear, Harry realized they were in a war. Only one side could emerge victorious. Only one. There would be no middle ground.

After a quiet weekend, the class once more assembled for another of Arabella’s exciting lectures. She was waiting for them, perched on the desktop. Hermione was sitting next to her, with a look of apprehension on her face.

“Take your seats, we have a lot to go over today.”

The class did as they were told and looked curiously at Hermione.

“What is the best way to communicate a spell?”

It was Draco who spoke up, “Arabella, I’m not sure what you mean. Do you mean communicate a spell you’re casting or how to teach a spell?”

“I suppose more teaching a spell. How do you communicate a spell?”

“By writing it down, of course,” answered Hermione.

“Wrong, Hermione. Many spells can’t be written down and besides that, if you don’t have the right pronunciation of a spell, it can cause grave damage.”

Harry thought of Seamus Finnegan’s difficulty with spells all throughout first year. He had developed a nasty habit of causing a small explosion every time he tried to cast.

“I thought you said that will was more important?”

“It is, Harry, but most wizards and witches need the correct incantation, they aren’t always powerful enough to cast spells without any sort of incantation the way that most of you are capable of. You’re all getting off topic though. If you can’t write a spell, the best way is to speak it. In the Dark Ages, a Dark sorcerer created a spell that would allow the embedding of charms into the soul of a person. This spell could only

be cast one way, but it could be broken several other ways. The trick to this was the ability of casting the hiding spell. It worked much the same way as Fidelius; in fact, the creator of Fidelius was Godric Gryffindor, who was adept at the hiding spell. I'd like to demonstrate for you."

With a flick of her wand and a few muttered words at Hermione, Arabella had completed her spell. Within a few moments, Hermione stood up and began waving her wand about the room. Rather quickly, they were all transported to a sandy beach. There were crystal blue waves crashing onto the white, warm sand. Harry smiled inwardly at the feeling of the sun on his face. The cold weather had definitely begun taking its toll on the students of IMS and it was obvious they were thrilled at being on the beach. Harry looked down the beach a ways and saw Hermione standing in the surf, her arms at her side, looking across the sparkling water.

"Mione? Do you know where we are?"

"We're in my head," she answered, a smile tugging at her sides, "This is my land of joy."

Harry greatly appreciated her taste. The tropical environment was heavenly. He had never actually envisioned a place like this. His happiest thoughts revolved solely around being with his parents.

After a few minutes, Harry found himself back in the IMS classroom. Hermione was back in her seat. Arabella promptly began her discussion about the charm Hermione had used, as well as the hiding of charms. Of course, everyone was scribbling notes and Harry realized it would be another exhausting day full of note taking.

After class, Hermione and Harry approached Arabella's desk.

"Good spell you two. You are definitely my best students. It would be a teacher's dream if every student were like the pair of you. Did you need something?"

"I, er, got a letter from, well, I don't know who," Harry said as he handed over the parchment.

Arabella looked over the paper and her expression was one of confusion.

"Arabella, what happens?" asked Harry.

"The body dies within three days and they bury it at Azkaban."

"But what happens to the soul? Where does it go? Is it just swallowed by the Dementor?"

"I don't know Hermione, I just don't know."

They all contemplated each other in silence.

“Thanks Arabella. Would you mind showing that to Dumbledore? Maybe he has an answer, Harry suggested.

She merely nodded as Harry and Hermione left the room.

Ginny was waiting for them outside the classroom. “Harry, can I talk to you?”

“Now?”

“No, I need you to meet me later. In the common room at ten o’clock. Ok?”

“No problem,” he answered as he hugged her. She barely hugged him back, before turning on her heel and leaving quickly.

He followed Hermione back to the dorm room.

“We have to go to the library. We’ll find the answer, somewhere.”

He apparated after her and they began searching the library in earnest. The answers they found were vague, ranging from a soul that was separated from its body before the right time wandering aimlessly about looking for a new home to a soul being caught in a limbo like state for all eternity and that it could only be freed by the strongest of powers.

The answers were all very unclear and Harry was not surprised that after a few hours, they had found nothing concrete. Without warning, a great barn owl appeared in the library, having flown in through an open window. It landed next to Harry and offered its leg, from which Harry untied a letter.

Harry,

Would you and Ms. Granger please come to my office immediately? I have a few very important things to discuss with you.

Professor Dumbledore

Harry showed the letter to Hermione and they gathered their things hastily.

Dumbledore was waiting by the gargoyle and they followed him up the circular staircase.

“When a Dementor administers the Kiss, the soul is pulled from the body, leaving a hollow shell. We know that the body dies within three days, but the question has always been: What happens to the soul? Many believe that it is housed within the Dementor. That is, by far, the most common belief. I have always believed that is not the case. In fact, I’ve always thought that the soul instead wanders in limbo.”

“But, Professor Dumbledore, what does it all mean? Should we research it?”
Hermione asked, her eyes full of unasked questions.

“I don’t think that the point of this message was to get you two to spend more time in the library however. This was a clue, and one worth investigating at that.”

Both Harry and Hermione were afraid to face their headmaster. He looked at them over the half-moon spectacles, the sparkle in his eye diminished to a mere glint.

“We’re being warned. There is nothing we can do now except wait. I have assembled the Order and we will decide upon a course of action, but I want the two of you not to worry about it. Carry on, tell no one and for the sake of Merlin, don’t research this in the library.”

Harry looked at his headmaster. Something was wrong. He couldn’t help but feeling that he and Hermione were being kept in the dark about something, but he only muttered a response and stood with Hermione, turning to go.

As soon as they were back in the hallway, Hermione was talking a mile in a minute, attempting to puzzle out the cryptic note. As she talked, Harry glanced at his watch.

“Hell! I have to meet Ginny in two minutes. I’m sorry Hermione, I’ve got to apparate back.” “Harry, good luck.”

“With what?” “Nothing.”

He gave her a baffled expression before apparating away to the IMS common room.

Ginny was there, stretched in an armchair facing the fire. She sat up when he entered.

“Hey Ginny,” Harry gave her a light smile and leaned to kiss her. She turned her head and his lips grazed her cheekbone. His feelings of confusion doubled as he plunked himself in a chair facing her.

“We need to talk.”

“About what?”

“Harry, how do you feel about me?”

He inwardly sighed, “Gin, you mean everything to me. I know what this is about and I can’t bring myself to love anyone right now; it’s just too dangerous. I- I couldn’t bear to make anyone a target.”

“Not even if that person didn’t mind, as long as she could be with you?”

“I could never do it.”

“Harry, that’s a lie. You would make an exception.”

“That’s not true.”

“Harry, your heart does not belong to me and it never will. You’re a wonderful guy and a great human being. You are going to make someone very, very happy one day, Harry Potter, and I’m sad that it won’t be me. It just won’t work Harry. Not when your heart belongs to someone else and so does mine.”

The perplexed feelings coursing through his mind brought no reprieve. He was hurt, scared, sad, and guilty. Ginny was a perfect girlfriend. She trusted him and loved him without any qualms. But now that she had said it, Harry knew it was true, it would never work. He didn’t know what she meant about his heart belonging to someone else, but he was hurt that she had said it.

It was her kindness that allowed him to hug her and they shared one last kiss, filled with fear and hurt. Never before had Harry been at such a loss. He had no idea what to do except return to his room.

The bed was cold. He had hoped Hermione would be awake to talk to, but she had gone to bed. Surprisingly, she was not in his bed and Harry mentally kicked himself. No wonder Ginny had dumped him. He had been a horrible boyfriend, allowing another girl to sleep in his bed. However, no matter how much he resisted, he slowly began to rationalize it. They had never done anything and it was a comfort thing. Besides, they were best friends and *nothing ever happened*. *Guilt plagued him and he climbed into bed, looking forward to a night without sleep.*

Chapter Ten: Angel

Christmas arrived at Hogwarts with plenty of snow, ice, and Christmas glitter. Two weeks before the end of term, the usual decorations began appearing. Pine trees from the Forbidden Forest were everywhere, in the halls, classrooms, the Great Hall, and even the bathrooms. The suits of armour had begun singing their carols and Arabella had given up on Dark Arts Charms and started teaching the IMS students nifty little Christmas charms. The Christmas Spirit was everywhere and everyone was unusually cheerful, everyone except Harry.

Ginny had not even looked in his direction since the night of their break-up and he hadn’t seen her much in IMS since then. Ron was angry with the pair of them and Harry figured it was because Ron had still held onto the hope of his dream working out in the end.

Hermione had played the go-between. Ginny constantly wanted her companionship, which left Harry to his own devices most of the day.

He was sitting on a window seat in the IMS common room looking out on the grounds. There was, as usual, a snowball fight going on and one side had magically erected a large snow fort, complete with moat and towers.

Sighing, he snuggled deeper into the blanket that was wrapped around his shoulders. The common room was empty; most of the IMS students had gone home. The Weasleys had stayed at Hogwarts over the holidays and of course, Hermione was there. Other than that, very few students remained.

Christmas Eve was quiet. It was only Harry and Hermione in the common room and Hermione had advised him that break would be a perfect time to work on the project that had been assigned by Professor Trelawney. Against his better judgement, Harry was writing an analysis of the prediction that Trelawney had made during third year. It was causing his suppressed feelings of guilt to resurface, but he ignored the nagging remorse and attempted to work on his paper objectively. Currently, he was outlining the series of events predicted by Trelawney. Hermione's project was heading on a much different course. In one of her older books, she had found mention of a prophecy, namely The Prophecy. Of course, she couldn't find information anywhere else, not even the restricted section. She had been begging Harry to take a trip with her to London to find out more about it, but he refused.

"Do you think we ought to head to dinner?"

"It might not be a bad idea," answered Hermione, not looking up from her notes. Books surrounded her; she was grasping a highlighting quill and covering anything that might even have an indirect relation to her prophesy.

"Hermione, let's go..."

"Hold on!" she snatched up a tiny volume and flipped through it. "Aha! Something about four..."

"Hermione!" Harry snatched the volume from her.

"Harry! Give that back! Are you turning into Ron? What's wrong with you?"

"Mione, it's Christmas. Put down the book and enjoy the holidays. Please?"

She looked deep into his eyes and Harry had to fight to pull his gaze away from hers. "Alright," she whispered, setting her books on the floor and standing up slowly. Without a word, she walked towards the Entrance Hall and Harry followed.

Hermione gasped when she entered the Great Hall.

Everything in the room was covered in glistening silver and white. The soft snow falling in the Great Hall impressed Harry and Hermione was fingering the pine needles on the closest elegantly decorated tree. He noticed the tears in the corners of her eyes, but he didn't say anything. By the time they had reached the large, central table, the brightness was gone and she had recovered.

Most of the Hogwarts staff was gone for the Holidays. Snape, McGonagall, Arabella and Flitwick were the only remaining teachers other than Dumbledore, who was lazily stirring his tea.

“Ah, wonderful, we’re all here now,” Dumbledore commented as Harry and Hermione walked up to the table.

Supper was a casual affair. A spread of sandwiches, different soups and warm drinks helped to take the chill off of the air. The mood was light-hearted, even as everyone sidestepped any mention of the Yule Ball tomorrow night. As of yet, it was unknown who was attending with whom.

After dinner, Harry and Hermione retired to their dorm. Harry yawned and waved goodnight to Hermione as soon as she had unlocked their door. She returned the gesture and turned towards her own door.

The midnight knocking had become familiar to him in the past weeks. She rarely waited for an answer and usually entered his room without any greeting or words, whatsoever. Christmas Eve was no different. She glided into his room, silent as the night, and walked carefully to the side of the bed. She climbed in and pulled herself close to him.

For weeks, they had slept this way. Without touching. After the separations from Ginny and Ron, something had changed between Harry and Hermione. On the surface, they were the same as before. It could even be said that they were better friends for it, looking to each other for comfort and advice.

At night, they were different. The tension was palpable, yet neither knew why. And so, each night, they slept in Harry’s bed, a foot apart, yet both felt as if they could not be any closer.

A pounding on the living room door woke Harry up the next morning. Hermione shot off of bed at the sound of Ron’s voice, guilty standing off to the side of Harry’s bed. Together, they walked to the living room and Harry answered the door.

“Happy Christmas Harry! Happy Christmas Hermione!”

“Happy Christmas Ron...” they both answered, rather suspicious of their estranged friend.

“Oh, stop all that rubbish, at least for today! It’s Christmas. Come to the Gryffindor common room, Ginny’s already there. We can all open presents together.”

Hermione practically ran for her dressing gown and Harry did the same, at a much slower pace.

Ron hadn’t been lying. The majority of students that had stayed for the holidays were Gryffindors and they were all gathered in front of a large Christmas tree. Ron had taken the liberty of gathering gifts for Hermione and Harry and leaving them under the tree.

The opening of gifts flew by. Harry and Hermione had decided to exchange gifts that night, so they were left to enjoy the gifts of the others. The gifts piled up and eventually the mountain of presents under the tree had greatly diminished. All of the students sat around the common room, wrapped in dressing gowns and blankets. A few of the seventh year girls had summoned hot chocolate and everyone was happily sipping their warm drinks and conversing about the holiday.

After some time, people began heading towards their dorms. The Weasley Twins were trying to organize a snowball fight and many had obliged. Harry and Hermione declined, Hermione declaring that she was anxious to get back to her prophecy and Harry wishing to take a nap.

When they returned to their room, they headed in separate directions to get their gifts. A few minutes later they were back in the lounge.

"Happy Christmas, Harry," Hermione said as she handed him a large, colourfully wrapped package. He looked nervously at the small package in his own hands. He handed it to her, "I hope you like it."

She smiled at him as she took the gift and tore off the wrapping paper. He did the same. "Wow, Hermione, what are these?"

"Witches' Balls."

"Er..."

"Oh, Harry, get your mind out of the gutter. They're an ancient type of magic. In the Middle Ages, glass blowers would make them to trap evil spirits and protect them. Do you like them?"

"Yes, of course," Harry said, peering into the clear, glass sphere. He looked at the gift still in Hermione's lap. She looked down and began opening the box.

"Oh, Harry, how beautiful," she whispered as she pulled a small, silk pouch from the box. He had ordered it especially from Madam Malkin and it matched perfectly against her blue dress robes.

"Open it," he instructed her.

She did and pulled out the silver band inside.

"It's a headpiece. I thought it would look nice for the ball tonight. And you can use the pouch as well, it should match your dress perfectly."

She nodded at him as her face fell and he couldn't puzzle out the strange mood that suddenly enveloped her. He ignored it. "There's something else too."

Inside was a small book, *Clearing Your Thoughts: An Instruction in Pensieves*.

"You've been so upset and stressed out lately that I thought you could use a Pensieve to clear your head."

"Oh, Harry, these gifts are so thoughtful, thank you so much!" she said, pulling him into a hug. He hugged her back, breathing in the smell of her hair. *Milk and honey...* it reminded him of summer.

They pulled apart, arms still lingering in an embrace. "Merry Christmas, Hermione," Harry breathed.

"Merry-" she didn't finish her sentence. She sat looking into his eyes with her mouth slightly open.

Harry stared back at her, taking in her deep, chocolate gaze, her full lips, and her soft breathing. His breath caught in his throat as he pulled back, "Hermione, I'm going to go take a nap before getting ready for the Yule Ball, I'll talk to you later."

"Right, the Yule Ball."

They both stood and walked to their rooms without turning back to look at one another.

It was nearly seven o'clock when Harry decided to get ready for the Yule Ball. He had spent most of the day lying in his room before heading out to join the others in the snow. He had knocked at Hermione's door, but she had either ignored him or been out. He hadn't seen her since that morning and hoped that she was all right.

He showered and went to his room, pulling the dark silver dress robes from his wardrobe. They were still in the plastic bag that they had been packed in after he had purchased them. Tearing the bag, he took them off the hanger, the odd, silky material flowing through his fingers. They had looked good on him in the store, but he had felt that the material was a bit girly. Still, he put them on, tried to do something with his hair, and looked at the bottle of Cologne on his dresser. It had been a gift from Sirius. The label on the bottle read Givon Galt Wizard's Cologne and Harry was deathly afraid of it. It smelled ok and the label on the bottle matched the label inside his robes, but he wasn't sure if that mattered. However, Harry wasn't sure how to put it on. Did he just apply a little bit? Was it a full body spray? He stood contemplating the bottle for a few minutes before picking it up and heading to Hermione's room.

"Hermione? Can I come in?"

"Sure."

"You aren't going to blind me are you?"

"Just come in."

He opened the door and was shocked to see her lying in her bed with the covers pulled up to her chin. She had no makeup on and her hair looked bushier than ever.

"Hermione! Why aren't you ready to go?"

"I'm not going. I don't have a date and my ex boyfriend will be there, looking devastatingly handsome and ignoring me. What a grand way to spend Christmas. And besides, my hair looks horrible."

He noticed that she had been crying and walked over to sit on her bed. She allowed him to pull her into his arms.

"Hermione, why don't you put your dress robes on? I'll help you with your hair and you'll be ready in no time."

"Harry, I don't want to go."

He stood up and walked to her wardrobe with an exasperated sigh. He yanked the door open and pulled out the midnight blue gown. "Do you see this gown? You love this gown and it looks fantastic on you! Get up Hermione, I promise you'll have a wonderful time."

She just looked at him and without waiting for an answer; he strode from their dorm and across to Ginny's. He rapped sharply on the door. Cadence opened it, dressed in a lavender gown.

"I need you and Ginny to come with me, now. Please."

She just cocked an eyebrow at him before calling for Ginny and in no time the girls had shut Harry from Hermione's room.

He heard various incantations and a lot of bustling about as he waited. In ten minutes, the door opened and Ginny stepped out, "She's ready. You can go in, I'll see you later," she nodded without meeting his eyes and Cadence followed her from the room. Harry waited until they had left before walking into Hermione's bedroom.

She was standing in the middle of the room, with her leg propped on a stool and fastening the strap on her shoe. She looked up as he came in and stood herself up straight.

The glow around her couldn't be ignored. The gown looked perfect against her chestnut hair, which was curled and piled on top of her head. The band he had given her shone brightly and accented the silver in her dress. Her makeup was tastefully done, accenting her best features naturally. Her eyes were lined in navy, pulling them out and making them look much bigger. She smiled at him and he had never seen anything more beautiful.

"You look amazing," he managed to choke out.

"You're not looking so bad yourself. Are you ready to go?"

He nodded at her. He wasn't sure when they had decided to attend together, but at that moment, he wasn't one to argue. He offered his arm, and she took it gingerly. Together they made their way to the Great Hall.

They were, of course, running late. Many Hogwarts students had come back for the Yule Ball and the remainder of the holidays. The Great Hall was bustling with activity when they got there and Harry could hear laughter, loud music and general chatter when he neared the doors.

Much to Harry's surprise and Hermione's chagrin, all activity stopped when they entered the room. Slowly, the partygoers turned to look at the pair standing in the entrance. Girls pointed at Harry and boys nodded appreciatively at Hermione, who was blushing furiously and looked on the verge of tears. Harry carefully steered her towards a table where Ron, Ginny, Lavender, Neville, Cadence, and a few other Gryffindors were sitting.

Dinner began shortly after Harry and Hermione arrived. Ron was munching happily on a piece of chicken when he picked up his goblet. He took a long sip and proceeded to spit the contents all over his plate.

"Ick! What is that?"

Hermione took a small taste from her goblet. "It's a very weak wine, probably lingonberry."

"Why do we have wine?"

"A special treat perhaps. It's very weak, there's probably hardly any alcohol in it, if there's any at all."

Ron made a sour face before taking a small sip of his wine again. This time he slowly savoured the flavour and after a moment smiled. "It's actually quite good."

The rest of the group began drinking and eating again. Hermione and Ron retreated back to ignoring each other and the earlier bit of conversation was forgotten.

Immediately after dinner, the dancing began. Harry and Hermione were both content to sit for some time, conversing occasionally, but mostly watching the other dancers.

At the beginning of one of the slow songs, Hermione pulled Harry out of his seat and they went to the dance floor. He was even more content holding her in his arms as they swayed in time to the music.

"Are you glad you came?" he queried.

"Actually, I am, otherwise, I would have sulked in my room all night and I wouldn't have been able to make such a dramatic entrance."

He laughed and just as she had turned her gaze in the same direction as his, he saw Ron kiss Lavender. The couple were about twenty feet to Harry's left and he had been casually watching them all night, waiting for something to happen and hoping that he could prevent Hermione from seeing it. However, she caught the kiss in full and immediately jumped back from Harry. The startled look on her face made Harry's heart freeze and within an instant she was fleeing from the Great Hall. Ron and

Lavender pulled apart as she tore from the room and Ron took off after her. Harry stood where he was and watched as everyone looked after Hermione and Ron for a few moments before returning to their dancing. Lavender was still in the same position, her face redder than anything Harry had ever seen and her fists clenched at her sides. Harry waited for her to move and she took off in the direction that his best friends had just fled in.

He waited about two seconds before apparating after her and collided with her at the entrance to IMS.

"Lavender, wait, what are you doing?"

"I'm going in there and getting my boyfriend. Now, get out of my way."

Harry stood gaping at the blond-haired witch who looked ready to pounce on him at any second. Without a thought, he moved aside.

She slammed the door open and it crashed loudly against the interior wall of Harry's dorm. He peeked around the door after she walked through and saw Hermione crouching on the couch and Ron sitting next to her. His hands were frozen in mid air as if he'd been explaining something to her. She had her head buried in her hands, but looked up through puffy, red eyes when Lavender slammed into the room.

"Ron, you either leave with me or I leave you."

"Lavender, that's hardly fair."

"I don't care! Ron, I'm your girlfriend, not her. You dumped her, remember?"

Ron was now standing and looked back and forth between the two girls. Reluctantly, he turned and walked to Lavender, who was waiting with her hips on her hands. She made a grab for his hand and she led him from the room. Over his shoulder, Ron through one, last pleading look at Harry, who was far too absorbed in Hermione.

As the door slowly closed, Harry bent down to meet Hermione's downcast gaze.
"Mione?"

"It's official, Harry, he no longer wants me."

"Hermione, you have to get past this."

"I know, Harry, I know."

"Then what's wrong?"

"I just wanted so badly for tonight to be fun, and now-now it's ruined."

"It's not," he said, as he stood up and planted a quick kiss on the top of her head. Within a few quick strides, Harry had reached his dorm. He walked to the trunk and

immediately found what he was looking for. He carried it into the living room and set the object down on the table, with his back turned to Hermione, blocking her view.

“Harry? What are you doing?”

“*Lusi.*”

“Happy Christmas all you lovebirds out there! This is the Sorcerer of Love broadcasting to you live from Newcastle on this very Merry Christmas. You’re listening to 109.8 SLUV, your favourite twenty-four hour Muggle Love station. Up next, we’ve got one of your favourites and mine...”

Harry vaguely recognized the opening chords of the song beginning to drift from the wizard wireless.

“Hermione, may I have this dance?”

She looked up at him, the brightness in her eyes unable to conceal the smile there. She took his offered hand and he gently pulled her off of the couch. He wrapped her in his arms and she leaned against him, both beginning to lose themselves in the Muggle love song.

*“Spend all your time waiting for that second chance,
for a break that would make it okay.
There’s always some reason to feel not good enough
and it’s hard at the end of the day.
I need some distraction oh! beautiful release,
memories seep from my veins.”*

*“Let me be empty oh! and weight-less
and maybe I’ll find some peace tonight.
In the arms of an angel, fly away from here,
from this dark, cold hotel room
and the endlessness that you fear.”*

*“You are pulled from the wreckage of your silent reverie
You’re in the arms of the angel,
may you find some comfort here.”*

*“You’re so tired of the straight line,
that everywhere you turn
there’s vultures and thieves at your back.”*

*“Storm keeps on twisting,
keep on building the lies that you make up for all that you lack.
It don’t make no difference escaping one last time,
it’s easier to believe in this sweet madness
Oh this glorious sadness that brings me to my knees.
In the arms of an angel, fly away from here,*

*from this dark, cold hotel room
and the endlessness that you fear.”*

*“You are pulled from the wreckage of your silent reverie
You're in the arms of the angel, may you find some comfort here...”*

Her sobs had subsided during the course of the song. She had straightened herself up and looped her arms around his neck. Her head was pillowed softly on his chest and his chin rested on the top of her head as he took in the smell and feel of her.

As the song drew to a close, Hermione lifted her head to meet his gaze. Harry again felt himself falling, falling hopelessly into the depths of her coffee eyes. Ever so slowly, almost imperceptibly, she lifted her chin.

As her soft, supple lips brushed his, Harry felt as if a great weight was lifted from his chest. He melted into her subtle kisses. Too soon it was over and she was pulling back.

“Thank you...” she whispered in his ear before planting a light kiss on the soft spot just below it. She turned and walked to her room.

His glazed eyes followed her progress before he sunk to the couch.

“Harry! It’s time to get up!” said a small voice.

Harry groggily opened his eyes and blinked several times before his vision cleared. A small child with unruly red hair and deep blue eyes was standing on the foot of his bed jumping up and down.

“It’s Christmas! Wake up, Harry! Santa was here! We have to go wake up mummy and daddy!”

“Hold on a second Hank. I’ll be down in a minute.”

The little boy bounded from the room and Harry heard the running footsteps in the hallway towards his parents’ bedroom. Harry pushed himself off of the bed and his feet searched for his slippers. Pulling on his robe, Harry stood up and headed towards his little sister’s room. Cheryl was standing in her crib, her red curls sticking to her forehead and covering her bright green eyes. She grinned as he drew closer and held up her chubby arms.

“Hey, Cherie... Happy Christmas,” he cooed softly, scooping her out of the crib.

“Hawwy!” she giggled.

He laughed and carried her down the stairs.

His mum and dad were waiting with Hank in the lounge room. They all grinned at him when he entered and he moved to kiss his mum good morning.

As soon as Harry had sat down, Hank ran to the tree and began distributing gifts to everyone.

The gifts piled up and shortly after they were all unwrapped, Lily left to make tea. James was holding the three-year-old Cheryl in his lap, who was happily bouncing up and down holding some new toy. Eight-year-old Hank was in the corner of the room, hovering on his new toy broomstick.

The doorbell rang and Harry removed himself from the couch, scattering bits of wrapping paper and ribbon as he did so. He reached the door as it opened, admitting his aunt and uncle.

“Lo Harry! Would you grab the baby for me?” said Ami, motioning to the year old Maggie she was juggling on her hip. Harry took the baby and stepped aside to admit Ami and Sirius, who was carrying Tesia- Tess, the infant, followed by their twin daughters, Lizzie and Lucy and watched their oldest daughter Joy bring up the rear. As Harry was closing the door, he heard another voice.

“Harry! Hold up! Open the door!” called Arabella, who was struggling with her five-year-old son, Max. Remus was carrying several large bags and a cake box. Harry also spotted the Grangers making their way up the driveway, his girlfriend Hermione touting her little brother Will along behind her.

Lily appeared next to him. “There’s my sweetie!” she squealed, gathering up Maggie. “Hiya, Angel!” she said, rubbing her nose against the baby’s. Peals of delighted laughter rang out in the entryway as more guests entered. The Grangers had reached the door and Harry met Hermione, who hugged him and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“Happy Christmas Love!” she said, hugging him tightly. Rachel Granger was next, squishing him in an embrace.

“Rachel!” called Lily, gathering her close friend into a tight squeeze. James had come in from the lounge room and had gathered the guys in the corner, where they were talking loudly about Christmas presents and some Quidditch game or another.

“Shall we all head into the lounge?” asked Lily, gesturing towards the open door. The large, chattering group obliged. Harry and Hermione immediately claimed the loveseat, but were instantly joined by Lizzie, Lucy, and Max. The children were all scrambling around the room, playing with new toys, shaking unopened presents, and generally creating a bunch of noise.

Harry was content, watching his closest family and friends interact. Dinner was the usual holiday affair with all the trimmings. His favourite times were always those spent with this large, unorthodox family. They were all happy and comfortable with their unusual group, bound as a family by all means except blood.

Immediately after dinner, a knock came at the door. Harry, though surprised, excused himself to answer it.

An older, grey haired gentleman was standing at the door. He greeted Harry with a soft smile and before a word was spoken, Harry's memories came flooding back to him.

"Tristram?"

"Good evening, Mr. Potter, Merry Christmas."

"Er, Merry Christmas."

"Harry? Who's at the door?" called his dad from the dining room.

"It's, erm, Tristram!" he called back.

"Well, bring him in here!"

Harry was confused by his father's reaction, but admitted Tristram anyhow.

"Thank you," the old gentleman bowed and led the way back to the dinner table.

"Tristram! So glad you could drop by, have a seat!" said James, smiling broadly at the elder gentleman. The conversation carried on where it had left off, this time including Tristram.

After twenty or so minutes, Harry noticed that he taken a seat at the head of the table. From his vantage point, he was able to see everyone in his extended family. They were all cheerful, laughing and loving, unaware of the strangeness brought by Tristram being at the table. As he watched, the light in the room dimmed and the image of his relatives faded. A few moments passed and only Tristram remained.

"He is a very powerful man, Harry. Don't you see that?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Tristram."

"Lord Voldemort, Harry, can give you everything you always wanted. Your family, your love, even your best friend, just as you desire."

"You and I both know that's impossible."

"I'm going to have to disagree with you, Harry. He can give you want you want, but he must have something in return. You know what he wants Harry."

As quickly as the dream had come, it was over and Harry woke up, finding himself half falling off of the couch. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, giving his head a good shake afterwards. His first thought was Hermione and he rushed to her door, knocking softly before he entered. She was lying on her large bed, tucked under the white duvet. Her soft, deep breathing filled the room and Harry immediately breathed easier. He shut her door and returned to his own room.

His dress robes were severely wrinkled. He threw them haphazardly over the back of a chair and quickly changed into his pyjamas. Unhesitatingly, Harry headed back to Hermione's room and climbed back into bed with her.

She awoke when he pulled back the covers. "Harry, is everything alright?"

"Yeah, I just had a dream. Ask me in the morning."

No answer came, as she had rolled over and gone back to sleep. He settled himself in and she moved back to him, snuggling against his chest. He dropped an arm around her and allowed himself to drift off.

For the second day in a row, they were awakened by a loud knock on their outer dorm door. They both stretched slowly and made their way to the living room, where the incessant tapping was growing louder. Harry opened the door and found Professor McGonagall poised, ready to continue her knocking.

"Both of you! Get dressed and report to Gryffindor Tower immediately!"

The look on her face sent the two Prefects into action. Quickly, they dressed and Flooed to Gryffindor Tower.

The scene that met their eyes was unnerving, to say the least. In one corner of the room, a group of students huddled around a sixth-year, who was reading from the Daily Prophet. In huddles around the room, there were students crying, being comforted or comforting. Near the windows in a grouping of chairs, sat another cluster of students that included the Weasleys. Harry noticed Ginny immediately. Her hair was messy and her eyes were rimmed in red. Ron had a protective arm around her and he too looked like he had been crying. Fred and George were standing close by and Neville was seated at Ginny's feet, holding onto her hand and murmuring comforting words to her.

Harry and Hermione noticed the Weasleys and made a beeline for the group. When Ginny saw Harry coming towards them, she jumped up and met him halfway. As soon as he was within range, she threw her arms around his neck and began sobbing wildly against his shirt. Ron walked up to Harry and Hermione.

"Ron, what happened?" asked Hermione softly.

"There- there was an attack on the Ministry. Hundreds of Ministry workers were killed. Percy was injured pretty bad and my dad is in a coma." More hysterical sobs from Ginny. "I guess the Minister of Magic called all members back to the Ministry for some emergency work. I guess there have been a lot of Death Eater uprisings lately. So, Connelly arrived just as the Death Eaters stormed the building."

Every student in the common room had been listening intently and you could have heard a pin drop in the room when Ron had finished talking. Everyone turned as the creaking hinges on the portrait door opened. Professor McGonagall entered.

“There’s too be an address by the Minister of Magic in fifteen minutes in the Great Hall.”

Her announcement brought the room to life. Students began getting up and heading to their rooms. Harry noticed that especially the girls began fussing, checking their hair and clothes in various pocket mirrors.

“Oh honestly, he’s not that cute,” said Hermione, with a trace of disgust in her voice.

Ginny just nodded and the two girls walked arm in arm out of the common room. Ron turned to Harry as soon as they were out of earshot.

“Is she doing ok?”

“Ron, why do you care?”

“No matter what happened between Hermione and I, she still is and always will be one of my best friends. I still care about her, even if I’m with Lavender.”

“She’s fine.”

Ron gave Harry an appraising look before turning on his heel and going back to his room.

Harry wished he could just sink into one of the chairs by the fire but instead he headed towards the Great Hall, anxious to hear what the Minister of Magic would say.

Many of the other Hogwarts students were already in the Great Hall, but surprisingly, the front row of seats was practically empty. Harry headed in that direction, planning on saving several seats.

Ginny and Hermione caught him up shortly. They were all seated when Ron, Neville, Lavender, and several other Gryffindors met them. Many of the IMS students joined them as well.

Slowly, students trickled in and the hall was filled in no time. Everyone sat in silence as an entourage including Headmaster Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall and Bernard Connelly slowly walked to the front of the room. They reached the small stage and parted, leaving Minister Connelly to walk to the podium.

“Good morning, students of Hogwarts and citizens of Wizarding Britain. It is on this day that I speak to you with the gravest of voices. This morning, at approximately eight thirty, there was an attack on the Ministry of Magic. Over 150 Ministry workers were killed and countless more were injured. It has been confirmed that the attack was staged by a group of Death Eaters. It has also been confirmed that our worst fear has come true. Ladies and gentleman, I must inform you that Lord Voldemort has risen and is once again planning a reign of terror on the wizarding world and possibly the muggle world.”

“Just a few moments ago, I ended a conversation with President Rearden, head of the United States Wizarding Council, in which it was decided, along with the heads of other wizarding governments, that a State of Emergency has been declared in the Wizarding World. We have been receiving reports that other attacks have been made on other government seats throughout the world.”

“As it was set forth by the Wizarding Council in the year 1978, should a worldwide State of Emergency be declared, it is within the power of the Ministry of Magic to declare Emergency rule. Therefore, the Wizarding Council of Great Britain has been dismissed. As acting head of the government, I have been given full power of the Ministry of Magic until the Emergency is over. Thank you.”

Even Dumbledore expected the announcement. The gravest silence settled upon the room as the Minister of Magic exited the room, surrounded by a group of aurors. The students shifted nervously in their seats, waiting for their Headmaster to say something. Dumbledore stood slowly and walked to the front of the podium.

“You are all dismissed and may return to your houses.”

“Hermione? Could I talk to you?” Harry called to Hermione, who was walking several feet ahead of him with Ginny.

“When we get back to IMS,” she responded, not meeting his gaze.

He only nodded and followed the two girls back to IMS. When they reached the common room, Ginny turned to go to her dorm and Hermione waited behind for Harry. They walked in silence to their dorm. Once inside, Harry turned to Hermione and pulled her into a hug. She rested against him, barely hugging him back.

“Hermione, I’m sorry for this morning.”

“What about this morning?”

“You know, for Ginny hugging me like that. I just... wanted to make sure you weren’t upset.”

“Why would I be upset?”

“Well, because of what happened last night.”

She blushed a little, giving him a small smile and a shrug, “Harry, what happened last night- it didn’t mean anything. It was just one of those times, you know, where you get caught up in the moment. We were both a little tipsy from the wine and we were both upset. It happens.”

Harry gaped at her. “It didn’t mean anything?” he asked her incredulously.

“No. Did you think it did?”

"I- I guess not."

"Harry, please, don't do this. I can't do this. I just can't. I don't want anything to change between us. I can't bear to lose another best friend."

Harry was at a loss for words. He couldn't identify his feelings for her and he had to admit that she had a point. He looked at her, trying to ignore the fear in her eyes and the tears beginning to form in the corners. "Fine. Then nothing will change."

He left her and walked to his own bedroom, shutting and locking the door behind him. A small envelope lay on his bed, with his name scribbled hastily. He tore the seal and pulled out a worn, frayed piece of parchment. He studied it carefully for a few moments before it clicked. He tapped it lightly with his wand, muttering a few words.

"What the hell?"

Chapter Eleven: Fear

"What the hell?" His mind reeled as he stared at the parchment in his hand. His thoughts wandered to last year, outlining the series of events that had occurred. The last time Harry had seen it had been in January. Moody had found him out late one night with the map and had taken it from him. He'd always assumed that the Marauder's Map had been thrown out or confiscated with the rest of Crouch's belongings. *So why in the hell was it in an envelope on his bed?*

His thoughts were interrupted by a hard knock on his door. Still staring at the map with its plethora of dots moving about, he walked towards the door and unlocked it. Opening it, he was completely shocked and annoyed to see Hermione standing there.

"What?" his voice dripping with venom.

"I was...just, erm, coming to ask you about your dream," she responded, the hurt and fear very evident in her eyes.

"What about it?" he said shortly.

"Er..you said you would tell me about this morning, but, um, the Minister-"

"Right, whatever, you can come in, I guess."

She turned her gaze towards the floor and caught a glimpse of the parchment in his hand.

"Harry! Is that what I think it is?" her eyes open wide.

"Is what what you think it is?"

"The Marauder's Map! Is that the Marauder's Map?"

"So what if it is?"

"But Harry! I thought that Moody-er, Crouch took it from you last year?"

"He did."

"So, why do you have it?"

"That's why I'm trying to figure out. Why are you here again?"

"Um, the dream."

"Right, well, sit down," he began telling her the dream and for some reason, was extraordinarily annoyed by her tears when he finished. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, Harry, it's just, so- so *sad*."

"I suppose you could look at it that way. It's just a dream, Hermione. For Heaven's sake, grow up. There are much scarier and sadder things go in the world than my stupid dreams."

"Why are you acting like this?" she said, overcoming her initial surprise at his harsh words.

"As if you don't know. Hermione, I think it's time for you to go, I need to speak with Dumbledore before tonight."

He could see the anger in her eyes, but still stood by the door, holding it open for her.

"Fine, you be this way Harry Potter! See if I care!" she said, slamming the door behind her.

Positively fuming, he turned to his desk, slamming drawers open and close, looking for a piece of parchment. His anger increased trifold when he found it sitting neatly on top of his desk. Slamming his top drawer closed after he'd grabbed a quill, he dipped the quill into the inkwell a little too forcefully, sending small drops of ink across his desk. He swore loudly, dabbing up the mess with a tissue.

He hastily scribbled a note to Dumbledore, asking if he could have a meeting with him. He sent the note off with Hedwig and flopped onto his bed to brood.

Again the sharp knock.

"Go away Hermione! I don't want to talk!"

"It's Ginny," said a soft voice.

Harry let out a groan as he stood up to answer his door. He had a feeling that from here on out, the day would not be getting any more pleasant.

"Hey, Gin, come on in."

"Thanks, I, erm, wanted to talk to you about what happened this morning."

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I will be. Ron and I are leaving tonight to go home, I'm not sure how long we'll be gone, which is why I wanted to talk to you."

"What's on your mind?"

"Well, I feel like I owe you an apology."

"For what exactly?" he asked, beginning to get a bit nervous.

"Well, for a few things. I'm sorry I acted the way I did this morning. I-" she began to tear up.

He reached and patted her hand, "Gin, it's ok, I understand this morning."

"I know," she said shakily, trying to calm herself. "I wanted to apologize for everything that has happened between us."

"How do you mean?" he said softly, his confusion growing.

"I should probably start at the beginning."

"I suppose that's a good a place as any."

"Ok, well, I've kinda liked you since, well, your first year. I mean, it was just a little crush, you were-*are* Harry Potter. So, when you finally noticed I existed over the summer, I was so confused. I thought I didn't like you anymore, but you, ugh, I don't know. Anyway, when you started to like me, I figured it'd be picture perfect. I mean, Ron and Hermione were finally together and I just thought that's the way it'd always be. Them and us, you know?"

He didn't answer her.

"Ok, well, I was spending a lot of time with Hermione, and I used to see how her and Ron used to act around each other. Well, when they weren't fighting anyway," she said, noticing the strained grimace on his face at the mention of Hermione and Ron. "I saw how they seemed to really love each other and I thought that was the way it was supposed to be. Which is why I said what I said that night in the Astronomy Tower."

"So, you didn't mean it?"

"Harry, you were right, we're too young to know what love is. I don't think I meant it, I just said it because I thought I was supposed to."

"What did you mean when you said that my heart wasn't yours and yours wasn't mine? Or whatever it was you said."

She blushed, "Well, I think I kind of developed a bit of a crush on Neville at the Halloween Ball and I meant that I could never have your love when it so obviously belonged to Hermione."

Harry fell off the bed.

"Oh my god! Harry! Are you alright?" she cried, jumping out of her seat to help him up.

"I'm okay. Fine, sit back down." he answered, standing up and brushing himself off. "Erm, what do you mean, exactly, when you say 'It belonged to Hermione'?"

"Why, she's your best friend, of course. You have her on this pedestal and I couldn't ever expect to be her. In your eyes, she's perfect and no one can ever replace her."

This revelation, *this epitome*, of Ginny's truly shocked Harry. He had no answer for her, because she was telling him things about himself that he didn't know.

"I'm really sorry if anything I said hurt you. I just wanted to tell you since I wasn't sure when I'd get to talk to you again."

"Right, um, well, I understand."

"I really must get going, I have a few things to pack. Thanks for talking with me Harry."

"Anytime. I hope your trip to the Burrow goes alright. Tell your mum that if she wants me to come, I will. Hermione, too." he added as an afterthought.

"I will. Thanks again," she said as she hugged him. It was a quick, friendly hug and she headed out the door.

Harry allowed himself to fall on the bed with a loud groan. His mind was racing with thoughts of Hermione, Ginny and the Marauder's Map, which was currently taunting him with its place on the desk. He laid his head back against the pillows and closed his eyes, determined to clear his head.

It was several hours later that another loud banging came at his door.

"Harry! Are you in there?" came the voice of Hermione.

He groggily opened his eyes and went to the door.

"What now?"

"We have an emergency Prefects' meeting with all the teachers. Starts in ten minutes, I just thought you'd like to know," she said curtly before turning and going back to her room.

He looked after her, growing more and more agitated. She had some nerve, being mad at him when everything was clearly her fault.

He quickly changed into some less crumpled robes and headed towards the anteroom off of the Great Hall. It was filled to the brim with teachers and prefects. Dumbledore was standing by the fireplace, his eyes roaming the room to make sure everyone was accounted for. Harry looked around after he'd grabbed the last available seat. There were several gentlemen scattered throughout the room, conversing in small groups. Professor McGonagall was listening to Professor Sinistra, who was dressed to travel. Harry noticed tears in the young professor's eyes. He also noticed Viridian Ellsworth leaned against the wall, looked haggard and disturbed. As soon as a few lingering prefects had entered the room, Dumbledore called the meeting to order.

"If everyone could please settle down, I'd like to begin the meeting," he waited a moment before continuing. "As you know, the attack on the Ministry of Magic has caused a great deal of suffering for the students and teachers here. Therefore, it has been proposed by the Board of Governors that we extend the holidays to accommodate the needs of the students, teachers and their families."

"Professor Dumbledore?"

"Yes, Ms. Bell?"

"How long would this extension be? Is there anyway it would interfere with the preparation for the NEWTs and OWLs?"

"We believe that a two week extension is enough to allow everyone to get their affairs in order without creating any major conflicts with the school schedule."

A few people around the room nodded and several audible sniffs were heard.

"Alright, as per custom, the extension must be voted on by the teaching staff, the Board of Governors and the Prefects, so if we could get that out of the way, I think there are some people here in the room that have other things to attend to. By a show of hands, all in favor of the proposed extension?"

There was not a hand unraised in the room. Dumbledore merely nodded and announced that the extension would be placed in effect and all families would be notified immediately. He dismissed the meeting and as Harry stood to go, he heard his name being called, "Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger, if I could have a word with both of you?"

They looked at each other before turning to face Dumbledore, Harry shooting Hermione a rather mean look and Hermione challenging him back with an eye roll.

"Harry, I received your owl about the dream. One thing that you mentioned struck me as very odd. Tristram said that Voldemort wanted something from you, do you have any idea what that might be?"

"Sir, I have no idea. At that point in the dream, I was too furious to ask him about it."

"Very well then. That is all I wanted to ask. Is there anything else you two have questions about?"

"No sir," answered Hermione.

They left the room, Harry exiting at a very fast pace so that he would not have to walk with Hermione.

"Harry!" she called after him, jogging slightly to catch up.

"Hermione, what?"

"Can we talk?"

"No. I don't want to talk," he said as he apparated away from her.

Ten minutes later he was sitting on his bed pouting.

"ALOHOMORA!"

His door slammed loudly against the wall of his dorm. Hermione stood in the entrance, wand out and eyes blazing.

"We need to talk."

"I. Don't. Want. To."

"Well, I don't care. You can't just go apparating off all the time. You're not supposed to apparate on Hogwarts grounds."

"Well, we can, so what's the point of not using something like that?"

"Harry, the only reason we can apparate on Hogwarts grounds is because we fully understand the theory behind apparition. We understand that our will is a lot more powerful than other witches and wizards and that's what enables us to apparate where we really shouldn't be able to. Not even everyone in IMS can apparate around Hogwarts like you and I."

"Is there a point to this?"

"Yes! Oh, you aggravate me to no end, Harry James Potter."

"Good, as long as we're on the same page, why don't you get out of my room?"

"Would you quit changing the topic?"

"*Would you quit changing the topic,*" he said mockingly, "You are such a bossy know it all! You come in MY room going on and on about how we can't do this and we can't do that and you want to talk to me about what an insufferable witch you are. Honestly, Hermione what do you want!"

"First off, we can't apparate all the time because everyone else will want to as well. And then we'll have people splinching themselves all over the place! Honestly, do you ever think? Professor McGonagall warned me about this..."

"Hermione! Listen to yourself! Do you know how annoying you sound?"

"You know, I haven't changed since yesterday and you didn't seem all that annoyed with me yesterday."

He snapped his mouth shut when he realized that it had dropped open at her cutting words. "Yes, well, yesterday I thought you were my friend."

It was her turn to experience the jaw dropping. "You really think that because of what happened last night that I don't want to be your friend anymore?"

"Hermione, this is the last time I'm going to ask. Please get out of my room. I really don't think I can be around you right now."

Her face lost the look of righteousness that it had since she had entered his room. She turned slowly and left, shutting the door quietly behind her.

"Mum! They're here!" Harry heard the voice of Fred Weasley ringing loudly throughout the house. He and Hermione stepped from the fireplace, carrying overnight bags and animal crates. Mrs. Weasley had invited them both to stay at the Burrow for a week, so that they could attend the Ministry Memorial and escape from the very depressed atmosphere consuming Hogwarts. Harry was beginning to wonder whether or not the atmosphere at the Burrow would be all that much better, but he shrugged aside his worries and walked out into the kitchen, brushing soot and ashes from his robes as he moved.

"Oh, good. I'm so glad you two are here. You know where your rooms are. I'll be serving dinner at six o'clock," said Mrs. Weasley in a very dry monotone. Harry gaped at her for a few moments before he felt himself being shoved by Hermione, or rather her overnight bag and Crookshanks' basket. He took Hermione's things from her, but not before giving her a very sinister glare, and headed up the stairs.

Knocking only once on Ginny's door, he opened it, unceremoniously dumped Hermione's things, including Crookshanks' basket, in the center of the rug and marched up to Ron's room.

The migraine from travelling via Floo powder was not lessened by the sickening orange of Ron's room. Ron himself was stretched on his bed, reading some Quidditch book or another. When Harry entered the room, he jumped up. "Thank god you're here, Mum's been driving us all bonkers. She's been spending most of her time sitting in the living room and crying. When she's not doing that, she's visiting the hospital. We haven't had a decent meal in days."

"Well, your dad is in the hospital. I'm sure she's very stressed out. How is your dad?"

"Nothing's changed," said Ron, barely audible.

Harry just nodded. "I suppose we should head downstairs. Maybe convince your mum to take a nap. Maybe we could even manage supper tonight?"

"Right, because we can cook," answered Ron, giving Harry a very strange look.

"Anything to help."

"Food poisoning everyone in the house might not be all that helpful,"

"I guess you're right. Maybe Hermione can cook?" added Harry as an afterthought.

"Are you still fighting?"

"I guess you could say that."

"What happened between the two of you?"

"Nothing. Stupid. Hard to explain," Harry mumbled as he turned into the kitchen.

Hermione was seated at the table with her arm around Mrs. Weasley, who was sobbing into her apron. She sat up when the boys walked in, quickly swiping at her eyes and trying to collect herself. Hermione was watching her with a very worried expression as Molly stood up and began rummaging through cupboards, obviously getting ready to start dinner.

"Ron, would you let everyone know that the memorial service will be tomorrow morning at ten o'clock?"

Ron nodded and headed off to find his brothers and sister, all of them being at home for once.

Dinner was quiet, as was the rest of the evening. Everyone awoke relatively early so that they could fight over the showers and by nine thirty, all the Weasleys minus Arthur plus Harry and Hermione were dressed and ready to go.

Harry was shocked when he found out the number of people that had been killed during the attack. Over three hundred witches and wizards had died. There were a great deal of Hogwarts students at the memorial service, which was being held on the lawns of what had once been the Ministry of Magic.

There was music at the service that Harry did not recognize. It was melodious and sad, played softly, it lent a very solemn air to the service. There were several eulogies and speeches that brought tears to everyone's eyes. Towards what Harry figured must be the end, Percy Weasley moved to the podium.

"We are all here today to celebrate and remember the lives of those who have moved on from this world. We are also here to remember those who have been injured by the recent atrocities. As a representative of the Ministry of Magic, I feel it is my duty to properly welcome our final speaker. Miss Penelope Clearwater."

A smattering of applause rose from the assembled group.

"Ladies and Gentleman, I was only five years old when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was defeated. The triumph of his defeat spread throughout Wizarding Britain, as well as the rest of the Wizarding World. It was common opinion that even the Muggle world should celebrate. It was an end to perhaps the Darkest era we had ever known, for even Grindlewald could not compete with the evil ways of the Death Eaters."

"And so we rejoiced. We were once again free to live and breathe without an impending threat of evil hanging over our heads. I remember greatly the tales of my old siblings, who had spent their youths in fear of an unknown."

"Nearly one year ago, the rumours once more began to circulate. It was said that You-Know-Who was back, yet very little occurred to support these tales. Those who believed were once again living in fear of an unknown."

"On December twenty-sixth our worst fears became reality. There was no longer an unknown. The message was simple, Voldemort has returned."

A collective gasp rose from the crowd at the mention of the name.

"Ah, you see, that is our weakness. Why do you gasp when I say his name? What's in a name? Voldemort. Does that not strike fear into your very heart? Does that simple three-syllable word cause you nightmares? Does the very mention of his name cause evil to directly descend upon you and your loved ones? In all honesty, it does not. It is merely a name. Nine letters. Three syllables. Do not fear his name. We must unite; witches and wizards, purebloods, half bloods, and muggleborns. Any soul who is innately good must join the fight, for there is strength in numbers and strength in goodness. Today, we are here to remember our loved ones. We must remember them by refusing to sit down and take it on the chin. We must stand up and fight. There can be no fear in our hearts of a man we can easily defeat. Voldemort. From this day forward there can be no terror associated with that name. We will not go quietly and most certainly, we will not go without a fight."

With a simple thanks, she walked quickly from the stage, leaving a very stunned crowd in her wake. They had expected a eulogy or a remembrance, certainly not the speech she had given them. The silence began to grind on Harry's nerves. A small clapping broke that silence. Hermione, whom Harry had been intently ignoring for the entire service, was meeting her hands together in a simple, appreciative gesture.

Dumbledore beamed proudly at her as he too began clapping his hands. Harry joined them, as did many others. The amount of clapping swelled, but there was no cheering nor was there a standing ovation. It was merely supportive, proud and yet solemn, in remembrance of those who could not fight the good fight.

"Hurry up! Everyone come in here! We are so far behind schedule, it's not even funny!" Arabella called to the few students who were standing outside the door of the IMS classroom. It was their first day back after the extended holiday, and clearly, Arabella was anxious to get started. They quickly filed in and found seats, staring incredulously at their teacher, who was sitting on her desk, rubbing her hands together.

"I want to get started immediately. This block is actually one of our less active blocks, so I'm going to cut it down to four weeks so as not to throw the remaining ones off schedule. Today, we're going to assign projects, look at some Astronomy charts that we'll be studying and practicing some duelling."

"Arabella? What projects, exactly?"

"Draco, I'll get to that in a minute. Kindly shut up and listen," she paused briefly, giving Draco a kind smile that greatly foiled the snap in her voice. "Right then. I've always been a firm believer in 'Know Thine Enemy'. As you've probably noticed, this entire program is based on that ideal. Therefore, I'm going to partner you up and assign each pair a certain field of the Dark Arts that you must thoroughly research and prepare a presentation on. The topics are Mind Control, Curses and Hexes, Torturous Methods, Dark Wizards Through the Ages and the Mistakes They Make Repeatedly and of course, Cunning Plans."

It was Hermione's turn to speak up, "Are you kidding? Surely, you must be kidding. Cunning Plans?"

"Hermione, by the end of the project, you'll be thrilled to have a funny name for your topic, because everything you learn along the way is going to depress the hell out of you."

Hermione just stared at her.

"Right. Now, let's partner you up. Hermione, I want you to work with Cadence, Harry work with Draco..." she continued through the students, partnering them up and assigning topics. Much to Hermione's dismay, she pulled "Cunning Plans" from the hat. Harry was too angry at having been paired with Draco to really care about their topic, Mind Control.

Draco sneered at Harry as Arabella launched into an hour and a half long lecture on the importance of Astronomy. Harry zoned out, thinking about his fight with Hermione. They still weren't talking and though his anger was subsiding, he had convinced himself that he would not be the first to say he was sorry.

When Arabella had finished her lecture, she dismissed them for lunch. Harry, being far from hunger, wandered back to his room. It was eerily quiet. He had grown accustomed to having at least Daryl in his room most of the time. Usually, Daryl and Chief Pip were off creating trouble or just meandering about with Crookshanks, but Daryl was usually waiting for him when he returned from his classes. Over the extended break, Harry and Hermione had traveled to the Burrow for a few days and had ended up leaving Crookshanks, Pip and Daryl there. Ms. Weasley had insisted, saying she would greatly enjoy the company. Harry couldn't blame her; it had to be dead lonely to be in the Burrow when no one was around.

Arthur Weasley was still in the hospital. Because his coma had not been caused magically, but rather he had been physically hurt, the mediwizards were able to do very little for. Of course, they were allowed to visit and talk to him, but the best advice the Weasleys had been given was to merely sit and wait.

Harry tried to detract his mind from Arthur Weasley. He stretched out on his bed, closing his eyes and begin to count backwards from one hundred in his head. He allowed himself a twenty-minute nap before heading back to the classroom. A few people had already returned to their seats and Arabella arrived shortly after Harry.

"You may all head out to the common room. I've decided to floo you all to the library in Diagon Alley for the rest of the day. We'll be beginning duelling tomorrow morning."

They did as she instructed and met the rest of their classmates in the common room. Within fifteen minutes, Harry found himself sitting at a table with Draco Malfoy, who was making a rough outline of what they might need to research.

"Potter, I think we need to organize this project based on the different methods. Spells, torture, brain washing, and the like. Since I'm obviously the brains of this operation, I want you to just follow my instructions. Go over and tell the librarian that you'd like her to find you information on mind control in the Charms Archive. Do you think you can handle that?"

Harry narrowed his eyes at the pale boy facing him across the table. "So I take it you're confident in my ability to read?"

"Did I say that? No. I'm confident in your ability to go ask the librarian to do work for you. You honestly expect me to believe that you and the Weasel actually did any work over the past five years? You probably just pawned everything off on the Buck toothed Mudblood."

"You better watch what you say, Malfoy," Harry said, glaring at his partner.

"Scary. Really. Now, go," Malfoy pointing towards the information desk. Harry screwed his face up and curled his fists, but he was eager not to let Malfoy get the best of him. Resolving to just let it slide, Harry stomped towards the information desk.

"Erm, excuse me?" he asked the librarian, who was stamping books. She didn't answer and Harry became minorly enthralled by the task at hand. She would take a

book from a large pile, tap the inside cover harshly with her wand, and some note or another would appear. She seemed to have the ability to change the note and color at will.

"What?" she finally said, still not looking up from her work.

Startled, Harry cleared his throat, "I, ahem, need some information on mind control, from the Charms Archive. It's for a school project."

"School?"

"Hogwarts School for Intensive Magical Study."

"One moment," she said before disappearing. After a few minutes, she returned with a rather thick scroll. "When you reach the bottom, just say *Procedius* and tap the end of the parchment with your wand. It'll show the next source." She finally looked up at him and her eyes widened significantly under her rather large Coke bottle glasses. "Blimey, are you Harry Potter?" she asked, her voice changing dramatically.

"No. I'm his evil twin brother, but thanks for the mind control information!" he said as he strolled away.

Malfoy had already secured a hefty stack of books and had housed himself in with the stacks of volumes.

He was glad to find that Malfoy ignored him as long as he worked, and set about taking notes on the parchment that the librarian had given him.

As is often the case with any family of charms, there is usually one focal charm that all of the others are created after. The most commonly used charms today are often shadows of a much more powerful and dangerous charm. There is an ancient myth that there was once a charm that, once cast, would render everyone within hearing range under full control of the caster. The mind of the victim would basically become non-existent. In the most horrendous forms of the myth, there is no fighting this charm. Of course, there is no evidence supporting the existence of such a charm, but the author would like to take liberties as far as assuming that the charm would be a very powerful, Dark magic and most likely it cannot be written down. It can also be assumed that such a powerful charm would have to be hidden in someone very, very powerful. However, this is mere speculation and should be used as so.

The strongest mind control spells are used on the victim during sleep. This is when the mind is most vulnerable for the conscious actions of the victim are not available as a form of protection. Often, the victim is somehow placed into sleep, either via charm or potion, and are then subjected to mind control spells.

Of course, mind control can be achieved in many ways, potions and spells being the most commonly used.

Harry found the parchment incredibly dry, but he scribbled notes as per his instruction. After several hours, his eyes began to feel very tired and he was beginning to lose feeling in most of his body, it having been so long since he moved.

"Malfoy, are we about done for the day? It's nearly time for dinner."

Malfoy simply raised an eyebrow at him before slamming his book shut, "I suppose so, though I'd really like to have looked up a bit more on the Imperius Curse. You know what they say, there's no such thing as being overly prepared. What did you find?"

Harry opened the parchment roll and found the bit on dreams. Malfoy took it from him and perused it quickly.

"My advice: show this to Granger and see what she says. Maybe she'll make the connection, even if you're too dull to."

Harry was puzzled, but tried to hide it, instead displaying his obvious annoyance at Malfoy. Taking the parchment, he gave Draco one more dirty look, and hastily gathered his things.

"Would you all please come stand up here? We won't be needing any desks today," Arabella asked, already beginning to banish the desks to the far back of the classroom. Harry watched with mild interest as the desks stacked themselves in the back of the room. During this moving process, the rest of the students returned and Arabella was ready to begin. She faced everyone with a mischievous smile on her face.

"Harry, come stand up here."

He did as she asked, standing directly in front of her with his wand out and at the ready.

"*Phantomus incendio!*" Without any warning, Harry felt himself engulfed in flames. He could feel the burning, licking flames singeing his robes and his arms and the hair on his head. He began to panic as the flames touched his skin. He was burning alive.

"*Finite incantatem.*" The burning subsided and Harry wiped a heavy dose of sweat from his brow. He realized soon enough that he was lying on the floor, panting, and stood himself up. Mo< "The Phantomus curse is the first curse we studied during charms. Who can tell me what it does? Akilah?"

"The Phantomus curse does very little on its own, but when combined with other charms, such as incendio, it creates a phantom of the curse on the victim, hence Harry thinking he was on fire."

The class nodded and Arabella smiled at them. With a flick of her wand, a list of possible uses for the Phantomus curse appeared on the board and they were once more

partnered up to practice the spells on each other. Harry and Hermione were stuck together, the only two without partners.

After going a few rounds with the spell, they switched partners and Harry found himself face to face with Draco Malfoy. The skinny, blond wizard looked at Harry with a distinctly mischievous look in his eyes. Arabella directed them to add to the mix *Phantomus Cæcitus*, which Harry recognized as Hermione's temporary blindness spell. After a quick demonstration on Katie Bell, she asked them to proceed. Harry turned towards Draco, wand out and at the ready. However, Draco's reflexes were much faster.

"Phantomus Avada Kedavra!"

The light that Harry saw comes towards him was a very slow-moving, very pale green. He saw Hermione watching them out of the corner of his eye and saw her mouth drop in shock. He heard a loud scream as the curse hit him. It hit him right in the stomach and he cried out as he felt a blackness seep through him. He felt an iciness come over his body and his eyelids began to lower. Consciousness faded into nothingness as Harry collapsed onto the classroom floor.

The bright white light swirled with the intermittent patches of darkness. He felt something grasping his hand as if doing so would prevent an ominous death. Blinking his eyes a few times, his vision slowly cleared and he found himself staring into a pair of chocolate brown orbs that made him very glad to be alive.

"Hermione?" he managed to whisper.

"Harry!" she choked out, his utterance having brought a fresh wave of tears to her already very bloodshot eyes.

He gave her hand a light squeeze and she abandoned all pretense and allowed herself to give him a very tight hug.

"Have you any idea how scared I was? To think that we haven't spoken in weeks. Harry, you could have died and I never would have gotten to say that I'm sorry. You could have died and we wouldn't have been best friends! I could never forgive myself."

"Shh...love, we can talk about it later... come here," he said, pulling up the covers of the hospital bed. She looked at him gratefully before moving onto the bed and tucking herself against him. She had obviously been awake longer than was usually recommended and seemed anxious to lay in a bed. "Now, why don't you tell me what happened?" Harry asked, once she had settled in.

"Well, we were all practicing the Phantomus curse and you got partnered with Draco. For whatever reason, he placed Avada Kedavra on you with the added protection of the Phantomus charm. Arabella was furious, but being Arabella took it upon herself to tell us that it was a very real possibility for something like that to happen. She said

we'd never know what someone was going to throw at us and we'd be lucky if it was just the Phantomus curse. She then decided to take you to the hospital wing and made Draco do it, who was muttering something about no one ever being prepared."

"Sounds busy."

"Oh, Harry, it was awful. I'm so glad you're okay."

"Hermione, what day is it?"

"Wednesday, you've been out for about two days now and it's been two nights since I slept."

Harry groaned audibly. "I suppose Arabella has a truckload of work for me? And you really should go sleep."

"But of course she has, and really I'm fine. I'm just relieved that you're alright."

He laughed lightly and pulled her into a hug.

"Harry?"

"Yes, my Mione?"

"Are we okay now? I don't ever want to fight like that again."

"I promise, I'll never let it happen again."

It was her turn to hug him and soon after, they settled into an easy chat and camaraderie that they had both sorely missed over the weeks. The fight was almost-*almost* forgotten and Harry was content to lay and talk with her, happy that, for once, things were nearly as they should be.

"Harry, are you sure you shouldn't be lying down?" Hermione asked, walking into the living room.

"I'm fine. Madam Pomfrey said it was fine as long as I was resting."

"Ok, if you're positive."

"Hermione, relax, I'm fine."

"Well, forgive me for being a bit worried, you were out cold for two days!"

"I'm fine now. Come here, sit with me, we need to talk anyhow."

She looked at him, taking a considerable amount of time before meeting his gaze. Slowly, she sat down next time, careful to leave space between them.

“Hermione?”

“Yes?”

“Relax.”

She took a shaky breath and drew her lips into a thin line. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Christmas Day.”

“What about it?”

“Did it really not mean anything to you?”

“Harry, I can’t allow it to mean anything to me. Why, did it mean something to you?”

His mind froze for an instant. Two paths faced him. Dare he venture into the unknown?

“Harry?” she implored, reaching out to touch his shoulder.

Shaking his head, he smiled at her, “Sorry, must be that pain killer I took.”

“Are you sure you want to talk about this now? Maybe you should lay down.”

“Mione! I’m okay really. Please, let’s just talk.”

“Alright,” she gave a resigned say and turned her full attention to him.

“In answer to your question, no.”

“It really meant nothing?”

“I was just caught up in the moment, you know? The wine, the warm fire. I was thinking straight and I’m sorry I acted the way I did for all that time. You were right, of course, and I’m sorry.” He gave a weak smile and hoped against all odds that she would buy it.

She did. “Oh, thank Merlin. Harry, I was so worried!”

“I know. I completely understand that you didn’t want to mess up our friendship.”

“You have no idea how happy this makes me. I’m glad everything is ok.” She hugged him and he momentarily allowed himself a moment of happiness and held her to him, breathing in her familiar and missed scent.

“I’m glad too,” he lied, through his teeth. She pulled back and gave him another million-galleon grin.

“Do you need anything? If not, I’m going to go to the library. I think I’m on to something with this Prophecy.”

“I’m alright.”

“Ok, then I’ll see you later.” She kissed him on the forehead as she stood up. Grinning like mad, she walked into her adjacent room.

He gave her another meek smile and as soon as her door had closed, he groaned.

Hermione, one, Potter, zip.

Chapter Twelve- The Magus

The hand of the new "Emergency Rule" reached into the furthest corners of the Wizarding World and Hogwarts was no exception. The year, though spotted by Death Eater attacks, had been relatively mild and the general feeling ease because of it quickly deteriorated into a feeling of great duress. The entire school had heard about Harry's brush with death. Everyone, with the exception of the Slytherins, frowned upon Draco. Of course, Arabella took it as a lesson to be learned and they were all put under similar spells until they could detach themselves from the feelings caused by the Phatomus spell. There were only one or two IMS students who couldn't escape the pain.

Harry was not one of these students. He had caught on rather quickly and abilities like these were become more rampant in his daily life. His studies became much easier, even Potions, which they had just started. Research became simple, he was able to pour over a novel even faster than Hermione. If anyone found this strange, they said nothing for there were greater things to worry about.

Over the course of the past year, many laws had been placed into effect as a means of protection and preparation for any unknown dangers. These laws were quickly scratched from the book. Harry had been somewhat annoyed that he would not be able to practice magic over the summer anymore. It had definitely been a perk.

The Underage Wizarding Law was back in full swing. Fines were being issued for something as simple as a child riding a toy broom. As if the several laws being scratched from the books weren't enough, countless new laws were in effect. Apparition was only allowed at certain points. Ways of travel were greatly restricted. Flooing was limited, broomstick travel had restrictions as well. Perhaps the greatest surprise came when it was announced that Muggles were no longer allowed into the Wizarding world, even if they had a child who was magical. It was obvious that Dumbledore and the other teachers were beginning to get worried about all the new laws.

The IMS students were far too busy to be worried about politics. Snape had begun working with them in Potions and they were also spending a great deal of time in the

greenhouses. There were few research projects and more hands on experience. Potions had been a stretch from their old studies. No more were they studying memory potions, but they were now studying truth potions, death potions, love potions, fame and fortune potions, and of course, the myths and thereoms of immortality potions.

They studied, or at least attempted to study, the potion that Voldemort had used in the graveyard last year. Harry and Draco had teamed up to research Voldemort's potion under the idea that it would be easy to do both that and their Mind Control project. Harry was finding himself in the library from the end of IMS until close for five nights a week and he found himself developing quite the rapport with the librarian. Madam Pince was friendly, though strict. She often let them stay late into the night, usually until one or two o'clock.

It was on one of these nights that Harry and Draco found a major piece in the puzzle that had become their mind control project. They had begun work on the project, both boys doing their best to steer clear of the theoretical spells on mind control. They had fast made it a rule that they were only going to cover tried and true methods. Even after their extensive work on the Imperius Curse and several other potions, curses, hexes and methodologies, their rough draft of the final paper hadn't been enough to meet the requirements set by Arabella.

Draco had, of course, been furious. He had spent hours coming up with elaborate examples for each of the methods they had described.

"This is your fault, Potter! I knew we didn't have enough material."

"Malfoy, settle down. We've got plenty of time before the project is due."

"Isn't that just like a Gryffindor! We've got no time Potter! Whatever else we find is going to end up causing me to rearrange our entire final presentation, plus let's not forget that we don't exactly have all the time in the world to work on this in the next few months. We've got that bloody Prophecy report due, plus Snape is pushing us extra hard. And as if that weren't enough, we have History of Magic and Muggle Studies and I can practically taste the hundreds of hours of research involved!" When Draco finished his mild rant, he was red faced and looked completely unlike his usually calm and collected self.

Harry, much to his credit, did not immediately collapse in hysterics. He allowed himself to hold back his laughter, and instead, felt himself turning beet red. He nearly lost consciousness from holding his breath, and leaked tears from his eyes before he sunk into a seat at the table in a fit of laughter.

His loud, bellowing laughs echoed in the library. It was the sound of a great release, a sign of all the tension of the past few weeks. He pointed at Draco; he collapsed onto the table in a heap, cradling his head in his arms and pounding on the table with his hand, all the while releasing great shuddering laughs.

Needless to say, Draco was furious. Harry was quickly brought out of his mood by a sharp thwip on the back of his head. Looking up, he saw Draco holding his wand.

There were many firsts that night. It was the first time that Harry had ever seen Draco go completely mental and it was the first time that Harry had actually ever been hit by a wand.

Everyone in IMS was watching as the scene unfolded, and as Harry chuckled, so did the rest of the group. Great peals of laughter sounded in the room.

"Entrerò nei vostri sogni e controllerò il vostro sonno!"

The laughing died immediately, for Harry had stopped and was now staring at Draco with a look of dismay on his face. The rest of the group was merely watching and Draco sat smugly, looking extraordinarily satisfied with himself.

"Where--how--what was that?"

"A spell. I came across it today while I was attempting to find information about the theoretical mind control spell. Why? Are you familiar with it?"

Harry stopped and racked his brain. He knew that spell. But how? Why? "I--it just sounds so familiar, and I don't know why."

Draco sniffed. "Well, I suggest you read some more about it." He slid a large, heavy book across the table to Harry, stood, and walked out of the library with a decidedly huffy attitude.

As if on cue, everyone went back to what they had previously been doing. Harry pulled the great book closer and peered at the miniscule writing. Of course, Draco had not marked the page that contained the spell and he had to do a lot of searching to find the right page.

Of course, its use is highly illegal, for it allows entry into another's mind. The use of the Entrero spell is unique in that the person being cast upon must be asleep, but dreamless. There can be no mental activity at the time of entry, for the mental plane must be completely void. Once used, the caster of the spell is given full control over the dreams of his victim.

Harry's mind was racing. He couldn't place why the words Draco had said were so familiar, but he couldn't shake the feeling that they were vitally important. Pulling out a quill, he copied down the incantation and the short passage about the spell so that he could pass it all along to Hermione. Then he remembered that he still needed to find some information on Snape's topic so that he could try and appease the now extraordinarily angry Draco. He still disliked Draco, but he knew that an angry Draco was not a pleasant partner for IMS projects.

Using the general emptiness of the library to his advantage, Harry walked back to the Restricted Section. Out of habit, he tiptoed to the brass doors and slowly opened them, cringing as they whined and creaked. He realized he was holding his breath and it out in a sharp hiss as he walked to the back shelves of the dusty, creepy room.

Admittedly, Harry had no idea what he was looking for, so he just roamed his fingers across the ancient spines of the dusty books, looking for some sort of clue on his mission. As he searched, a decrepit, blood red coloured book caught his attentions. There was only one letter that he could make out on the cover of the book; a gilded, faded 'V' was slightly off center near the top of the front cover. His curiosity got the best of him and he flipped it open. Not surprisingly, it wasn't in English. As he flipped through the book, a bunch of parchment fell to the floor.

He bent to pick it up, and opening the folded sheets, realised it was the same language as the book. However, it was completely handwritten and looked suspiciously like a journal.

He took both of his discoveries and tucked them into his rucksack. Looking at his watch, he saw it was nearly two o'clock and decided to head back to his dorm.

"Morning," said Hermione without looking up from her stacks of textbooks.

"I can't believe I was in the library later than you."

"I rather enjoyed your little laughing fit; the look on Draco's face was priceless."

"I know, except now he's going to be hell to work with."

"So find him some obscure little fact for your project and he'll be content."

"Actually, I found some books that might interest you."

He pulled the book and parchments from his rucksack and handed everything to Hermione.

She took them from him and he watched with a hint of amusement as her brown eyes doubled in size. "Harry! This is just incredible! I think it's Latin, could take awhile to translate--What are you doing? Sit down!"

Harry had been heading towards his room, anxious to go to bed. But he did as she said and sat next to her on the couch as she took out her wand and began the laborious project of translating the heavy text. He stretched his legs out, gently pushing aside some of her books to prop his feet on the table. Leaning back against the couch, he sighed as he felt his eyelids begin to droop. His head fell back against the couch as he drifted off into sleep, ignoring the bright reading light and Hermione's words as she translated her book.

He sighed as his feet hit the soft, warm sand. There was something about this place that connected him to it, something that intertwined it with his soul. It was in the air. A type of electricity, a radiance that came out of everything. However, he looked around and noticed there wasn't much of anything. It was all sand dunes. Sand dunes and an invisible sun that beat down upon him, creating sweat on his brow. He turned to his left. Sand. To his right. Sand. As far as the eye could see stretched white,

blinding sand. Yet, even as the sand hurt his eyes and he cringed in pain, there was something keeping him here. Even if he'd wanted to escape he couldn't.

The flash did not surprise him, but the outcome of it did. He found himself in a complete new place. The white sand was gone and in its place was pure darkness. The black soothed his aching eyes and he felt the same calmness here as well. The heat he had begun to suffer from had subsided. He was cooling, no longer sweating, and breathing at a regular rate. The only thing unchanged from the previous place was the feeling of an electric charge. Once he reached a level of comfort, he looked around. However, there was nothing to see. Even where the sand had been, there was a sky. There was a noticeable difference in the land and the sky. Here there was nothing. And as quickly as he had been soothed, he was thrust once more into feelings of discomfort. The coolness of the air began to seep into his skins. He felt the deep chill within his bones. The darkness was blocking his thoughts and he felt it begin to creep into his mind, ebbing the flow of consciousness.

Another flash. He sighed with happiness. The ground was green, the sky was blue. Here the feeling of radiation was magnified twofold and Harry began to feel the power building with him. As he stood in the green field, he looked around. To the west, there was a great storm building. Towering black clouds loomed in the distance with the promise of a great show. To the east, there was an eternal sunlight, bright, white and unchanging. This middle ground, between the light and the dark, was where the power reverberating from him was strongest. Intrinsically, Harry knew what it was. Magic. It surrounded him, wove through him, and joined his soul. It was a part of him. Every fiber of his being vibrated with this organic power. He was home.

"Welcome Harry, to Terre de la Magie."

He spun at the voice and was not surprised to see Tristram looking down at him.

"Terre de la Magie? But--how can I be here?"

"What do you mean how can you be here?"

"Well, I thought only magi could come here."

"Harry, don't you know what you are?"

"There seems to be this horrible trend that people know more about me than I know about myself."

"Well, be that as it may, it is time someone told you what you are."

"And I suppose you're going to do the honour?"

"But of course. Harry, do you know what a magus is?"

"No."

"A magus is a very powerful magical being. What was your MQ again?"

"It was something like 426."

"And your friend, Hermione, who is probably the strongest witch you know, tests at around 260. She's half-Magus. But you are completely Magus."

"Yes, but what does that mean?"

"It means that I could not kill you." A new voice came from behind Harry and Tristram. Voldemort was standing there, watching them. He grinned maliciously at them. "The power of your mother protected you, and I could have easily killed you, but Lily was just as powerful as your girlfriend. It was her strength that protected you. You would have died without her."

His mind flooded with questions, but Harry stood his ground silently. "What do you want from me?"

"You know what I want. You have what I want."

The dreams were confusing Harry more and more. He was surprised at this dream, because it had lacked the maliciousness of his prior nocturnal visits from Voldemort. The more he pondered the dream, the more he was convinced that it was some sort of scheme cooked up to get him to let down his defenses. He refused to do so, and the first thing he did when he awoke was to go to his room and write down the dream. He had begun keeping a journal containing his dreams and all the information that he had found about them. As their studies increased, so had the bulk of his journal.

He walked back into the living room. Hermione had fallen asleep on the couch as well. How had he not noticed her before? He shrugged it off, trying to ignore the feelings of unease that came with the knowledge that he and Hermione had fallen asleep in the same room. They had not slept in the same bed since Christmas and Harry missed having her in his bed. There had never been anything sexual about their nightly habits, but he missed the feelings of closeness between them. Of course, he had lost it all when he had kissed her. Even after their long talk, Harry was convinced that the kiss had placed a strain on their relationship.

"Hermione, wake up."

She didn't. After attempting to rouse her, he picked her up gently and she sunk into his arms, curling against his chest. He tried to ignore the feeling of her breath on his neck as he carried her into her room. After tucking her in, he kissed her lightly on the forehead and walked out, closing the door softly behind him.

A feeling of sadness crept into his heart. She was there, in the flesh, talking to him, laughing with him and being her usual self, but Harry couldn't shake how much he missed his best friend.

The following morning, Arabella roused them all at six o'clock. They would be beginning Herbology, and she had reserved the greenhouses for six thirty.

Harry was yawning when he walked into the living room to find Hermione dressed in muggle clothes. She was wearing jeans and a heavy sweatshirt. Her heavy school robes were draped over the back of the lounge.

"Morning."

"Morning, and don't say anything about my clothes. It's cold and early and I don't want to hear it."

He nodded as she stood, slipping the robes on as she walked towards the common room. He followed her and they found everyone else in a similar state.

Arabella, however, was wide awake and looked as if she'd been so for hours. She marched them down to the greenhouses and after pairing them up, she handed each group a basket and a pair of dragonhide gloves. "Often times, Potions and Herbology go hand in hand. In your second year, I'm sure you all remember the use of the Mandrakes in the potion for curing those petrified by the basilisk. This afternoon we are going to be making a Truth Serum. Professor Snape has asked me to tell you that next week, you will be making Veritaserum, though you will not be using it. However, you will be testing this truth serum, so I recommend you take the time to find the proper ingredients. You will be needing dittany, which you can find in Greenhouse four and indieque, which you can find in Greenhouse two. The indieque must be dried and don't forget to use the proper charms for severing the bulbs from the dittany."

They set off to find the plants needed for their potions. This served to be no easy task, as Arabella hadn't really given them much direction. After about two hours, everyone had collected what they needed and were standing just inside the first greenhouse.

"Did everyone get everything they needed?" Arabella asked cheerfully, seemingly ignoring her frozen students. Their nods sufficed as an answer and she led everyone back inside, where they were told to go immediately to the dungeons.

"Good morning," Professor Snape drawled as he met them at the entrance to the dungeons. "If you'll all follow me, I've set up one of the dungeons for your use."

They followed him and soon found themselves in a very cramped dungeon that reminded Harry of the Potions classroom, except the smell was much worse and there was less light. Snape gave them further directions for brewing their potions and said he would return after breakfast. Harry and Hermione set up their cauldrons and began the painfully slow process of brewing this particular potion. About half an hour after he had left, Snape dropped by to bark further orders at them.

"I'm going to go back to the dorm and get that small book you found Harry, I have a feeling it will have some very important clues," she whispered to him after Snape had left.

She nonchalantly left the room, leaving Harry to watch their bubbling cauldron. It was still blue. Snape said that when it had turned purple, it would be finished. Harry had no idea how long it would take to turn purple, but with a sinking feeling he realized it wouldn't be soon.

Hermione appeared twenty minutes later, holding the half-translated journal in her arms. She moved aside some of their potion supplies and withdrew her wand. Again, Harry heard the muttering of unfamiliar words and he watched in amazement as the very words on the page were sucked into Hermione's wand. The wand tip would glow a strange iridescent purple color and after a few moments, words will tumble out of the wand again and begin to change and warp until they were in English. He couldn't help but be amused as the words jumped around the page, ordering themselves in a readable manner.

It took Hermione about half an hour to finish translating the entire book. Their potion had turned a very strange green colour and Harry was beginning to worry.

"Hermione?"

"Yes Harry?"

"Is the potion supposed to be this vile green colour?"

"Is it purple?"

"No, it's green."

"Well, when it turns purple, we'll worry about it."

Harry gaped at her. "Who are you and what have you done with Hermione?"

"Oh, relax, I'm trying to translate this last part, but it won't let me. Rather strange really, this doesn't look like any human language."

Harry peered at the page she was currently running her wand over. There was no movement or glowing purple light. She mumbled the strange spell again and again and nothing happened. "Perhaps if you read the rest of the book, it would tell you how to translate it?"

"Perhaps," she mumbled. She flipped back to the beginning of the book and motioned for him to join her. They peered at the ancient pages. For the first ten or so pages, there wasn't anything discernable. There were a few diagrams, odd phrases scattered about, and a strange word here or there. Harry was interested in the diagrams, but Hermione flipped past them until she came upon a page with actual sentences.

So subtle and exact was the potion, that it's purest form was completed only one time. It was originally created as one of the Four. It is far more powerful than anything that can be imagined by the average wizard. The Philosopher's Stone is mere child's play, for not even the greatest alchemists of all time could complete the potion. Its use is not widely known as an incorrect brewing means certain death. This is not a potion

for the weak of heart or mind. Those who are feeble cannot bear the weight of immortality; no mortal being can, it is not within our capacity. However, curiosity and advancement of knowledge have always been the muses of my quests. Therefore, I cannot help but to share what I have found, be as it may that a most certain death will result. It is for the betterment of society that I work...

After that, the writing became illegible and smudged, as if something had been spilled upon the pages. However, the writing picked up once more on the next page.

I know not the date, it seems as I have never left this room. From the dawn of my life until its dusk, I shall remain in this room, solving this puzzle. I wish to know how to do this potion, it has become my goal in life. My strongest desires lay in my ability to unlock the mysteries, not only of this Potion but of the Four. Why must they be so hidden? Why so taboo? What is there purpose? Who made them? Why?

-VS

'Why' has become my question of choice as I slave and labour. I went to the Lady Lucia today and she gave me a Prophecy, passed down through the ages, older than even the Founders. I wrote it down and charmed it. I shall never reveal the secret to unlock it, for only those smart enough are worthy to know the most awful truth. I am not sure whether the Prophecy answered more questions or asked more. I will have many sleepless nights over this discovery, but I am moved to ask, what is different than any other night? Sleep is but a thing of the past, a desire I do not have.

-VS

They reached the end of the page and Hermione turned to look at him. "Harry! This is incredible!"

"Where did you find that?" hissed Draco, coming up behind them before Harry had a chance to answer Hermione.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hermione answered without looking up at him.

"That book. Where did you find it?"

"How do you even know about it?"

"Never you mind. Where did you get it?"

"I don't know how you know about this Draco, but I suggest you forget that we have it," she said icily, glaring at him pointedly.

He was obviously seething, but he let it go, turning back to his reading. Hermione looked at him one last time to make sure he wasn't watching and flipped open the book. She also had some pieces of parchment with her that looked like notes.

"Hermione, what is that?" Harry asked louder than he meant to.

"Shh! It's my notes on that Prophecy I was studying. There seems to be something connecting this, your Mind Control project and this journal, I just can't quite put my finger on it."

Harry just nodded and stared at all the papers spread in front of her. He noticed Hermione's notes, which were very haphazard and messy, quite unlike her usual notes. There were odd bits of phrases here and there, followed by lengthy explanations and word translations. Upon closer inspection, he noticed it was mostly translations because the odd phrases weren't in English. They weren't in any language that Harry recognized. He was about to ask Hermione when she pulled out a piece of parchment that had been folded and stuck in the back of the book. She read it over, looking between it and her notes. Suddenly, she hit him rather hard on the arm. "I knew it! Harry! This is it! This is the entire prophecy!" she exclaimed.

"Well, what does it say?"

She looked crestfallen, "I have no idea. I've only found bits and pieces of it scattered through different books, but I haven't been able to translate it properly."

Harry nodded and took the journal from her.

Today was a breakthrough. I brewed the potion today, yet I am terrified to try it... there are many methods to use the potion. It can be used to bring the dead back to life and if used by the living, it creates immortality. I am now stricken with guilt, do I take the potion? Or do I destroy it and all remnants of the potion? This is not a tool to be given to man, that much is true. My great great grandfather, as I have discovered, created this potion as some sort of key, to what I know not. He hid it in our family vault, hoping that it would be destroyed for only he, Rowena, Godric, and Helga knew of its uses. Surely, there is some greater mystery to this, one that even I cannot comprehend.

-VS

I have decided to wait to use this potion. I have stored it and hope that it will keep. I am determined to solve this mystery, even if it means the death of me.

-VS

Harry looked at Hermione as she read over his shoulder. They were both startled by this journal and a million questions were running through Harry's mind. How had Voldemort found this potion? It was obviously the one he had used but where had he learned about it? If this journal was the only answer, how had he gotten it? Harry flipped further into the translated pages...

Today, I will take the potion. All of my research and the key to the potion are all included in this diary, however, my language is easily translatable. I have scripted it in an ancient tongue, much like the original instructions for the potion. Within this book lies the key to all the mysteries of the Prophecy and the Four Keys. I instruct you, fair reader, beware, for this book is not for the weak.

The writing stopped abruptly and Harry flipped further back in the book, past the drawings of a cauldron and gravestones. There were some fifteen more pages of

writing and the only thing he could discern was that it was the same language as the Prophecy. He shook his head; they had reached a dead end. It was obvious that he couldn't learn anything else from the book, not without some major translation, and he didn't have the time to undertake such a project.

Hermione began pouring over the Prophecy, trying in vain to decipher it. Harry turned to look at their potion, which had turned a lovely amethyst colour. He picked up a beaker and siphoned some of the potion into it. About twenty minutes later, Snape came back to tell them to leave their potions on the shelves, as they wouldn't truly be finished until the next day.

They all trudged up to IMS. It was only 11:00, not yet time for lunch. Harry was hoping that they'd have a break before lunch, but Arabella immediately ushered them into the classroom.

"I thought we could use this time to discuss some of the things we've learned so far this year. The OWLs are getting closer, you're only got another 10 weeks or so. Does anyone have any questions?"

No one raised their hand. Harry remembered his dream from the previous night and slowly raised his hand.

"Hermione?" called Arabella, who noticed Hermione's hand first.

"What's a magus?"

Nearly everyone shifted in their seats, leaning somewhat closer to hear Arabella's answer. It was common knowledge that Harry had the highest MQ out of the group, and by leaps and bounds at that.

"A magus is a super big badass wizard."

"Um, is that all?"

"No, they're more magical than everyone else because magic is intertwined with their soul. It's a part of them instead of merely being a tool like it is for the rest of us. There are half-Magi like you, but Harry--Harry is the first full Badass Wizard Guy."

"Ah, so can I shoot laser beams out of my eyes?" Harry piped up, catching on quickly.

"Probably, but don't try, it might reflect off of your glasses."

"Can he bend iron in his bare hands?" asked Ginny.

"Sure, but only if he uses magic."

"Can he leap tall buildings in a single bound?" Draco questioned.

"On a broomstick."

"Is he faster than a speeding bullet?" Hermione asked as she stood up, looking rather flustered.

"I said Badass Wizard, not Superman. Sit down."

"B-but--but."

"But what Hermione?"

"Isn't there a more technical explanation?"

"Do I look like the Encyclopedia Britannica to you?"

"Erm, but you're the teacher."

"So I am," she paused before resuming a more serious tone. "All kidding aside, a Magus was a theoretical thing until Harry here came along. And you really are a half-Magus, as is Draco. Magi and half-Magi are very special magical beings. Like I said, magic is a part of you, it's in your blood. It practically seeps from you. You and Draco have always been a bit pretentious in your studies because of your abilities, but Harry didn't come into full power over the summer."

"Is that why we can apparate here?"

"Yes, and also why you can perform wandless magic. In fact, the only reason Draco here isn't an Animagus is because of a curse on his family."

Draco reddened as she said this. He raised his chin up a bit and sniffed, obviously determined to not let it bother him.

Arabella continued her explanation, moving on to the more mythical aspects of Magi. She explained different abilities and ancient prophecies concerning the Magi.

"Arabella?"

"Hermione?"

"Um, you wouldn't happen to know any ancient magical languages would you?"

"Of course, in fact, there is an ancient language of the Magi. It is believed that thousands of years ago, everyone on the Earth had a bit of magic in them. The Magi were almost a separate race of people, being as magical as they were. There is an ancient language, called Mage,--yes, they were a creative bunch-- that could only be spoken by Magi and half-Magi. It is believed that although the language is dead, if it were spoken aloud, anyone with any Magi blood, at least half of course, could understand it."

Hermione looked as if a lightbulb has just turned on in her head. She scribbled down what Arabella had said.

They talked for a bit before lunch, Hermione scribbling down everything Arabella mentioned relating to Magi. As soon as they were dismissed, Hermione dashed off to the library and Harry, for once, decided not to join her, but headed to the Great Hall instead.

“So then, Trelawney told me that I would die in a boating accident before Christmas. Of course, it didn’t happen and I haven’t taken the class seriously since then.” Parvati was regaling everyone at the table with her story of how she had come to disbelieve in Divination. Ever since the Boating Prediction, as she and Ron had come to call it, she spent much of the class causing trouble with Ron. Lavender was furious with them, as she still believed Trelawney to be the greatest Seer the world had ever known.

“My dear, I see a great, watery death for you. Very soon and very cold,” said Ron in a high, wispy voice, attempting to impersonate Trelawney.

“Oh, honestly, it wasn’t that bad. She’s really very good at Divination, you two need to give her more credit. She probably absorbs so much from teaching, she’s bound to get confused and make a mistake once in awhile,” Lavender said a bit defensively.

Harry watched as Ron tried to hide his snickers by ravishing a chicken wing.

“So, what is everyone going to be doing over Easter holidays?”

Holidays started in a few weeks and Harry had planned on staying at Hogwarts once again. He almost wished that he could go back to Privet Drive and spend more time with his aunt, but the news from the outside world was beginning to sound a bit tense. It seemed as if something was building and everyone sat holding their breathes, waiting for some clue.

“I’m going back to the Burrow,” Ron said between bites of his salad.

“I’m staying here,” Hermione spoke up, still not taking her head out of the book she had been reading all through lunch.

“I’m going back to the Burrow as well, thought I might help Mrs. Weasley out as Mr. Weasley is still in the hospital,” Lavender said rather quietly. Hermione bristled a bit at the mention of Lavender going to the Burrow, but it went unnoticed as everyone turned their attention to Mr. Weasley. His condition had not changed since Christmas and the worry surrounding his condition was beginning to build as well.

“Oh, Harry! Look at the time; we have to go down to the Dungeons to test out the Truth Potions today.”

“Truth potions?” asked Ron.

“Yes. We had to brew Truth potions today. We’re looking for volunteers to test them out on, are you up for it Ron?” Harry asked teasingly.

“Best be careful with him, Harry. If you don’t want to hear about anything going on in the supply closets, it’s in your best interest not to test it on Ron,” Seamus interjected.

Ron’s ears turned a furious shade of pink as a similar shade seeped into Lavender’s cheeks.

“Seamus, that’s enough, I won’t have you starting any rumours about me,” Lavender said, her voice an octave higher than usual.

Everyone laughed as Harry and Hermione stood to leave. As soon as they were out of earshot of the other Gryffindors, Hermione let out an exasperated sigh. “Those two need to be less hormonal.”

“Hermione! Really!”

“Well, don’t you think so? Going about doing Merlin knows what in supply closets! Goodness, I would never have been caught doing any such thing.”

“Who said they were caught?”

“Harry, you’re missing my point. I’m just saying that I would never want to do anything, erm, *intimate* where I could easily be caught.”

Harry laughed as a slight redness tinged her features. “Hermione, you kill me, you know that?” He said as he slung an arm around her shoulder and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

She slipped out of his grasp, the redness flaring up even more. She turned and caught his gaze and an awkward silence passed between them. After a moment, she shook her head and let out a forced laugh, “What am I going to do with you Harry Potter?” She turned once more and walked a little more quickly than she had before.

“Probably nothing,” he said under his breath as he caught up to her.

“Quickly get your potions and then get together with your partner,” Snape said as the IMS students filed into the room. Harry sighed with relief. At least it would only be Hermione asking him questions.

“Take your seats. I want one of you from each group to take exactly one sip of your potion. I would like the other partner to ask questions.”

“I’ll go first, Harry. Give me the potion,” Hermione said as she reached for the beaker. She tilted it back and took a sip from it. The look on her face betrayed the taste immediately. “Oh, it’s vile! Blech!” she paused, making odd faces as she adjusted to the strange new taste. “Alright, go ahead.”

“How do we know its working?”

“I can tell. It’s a rather odd feeling. Go on then.”

“Erm, alright. What’s your favourite colour?”

“Red. Can’t you come up with better questions?”

“Erm, alright, what’s your favourite book?” “*The Wizard in the Willow.*”

“Isn’t that the romance novel you were reading over the summer?”

She blushed, “Yes.”

“Right then,” he said, looking around the room, trying to think of another question. “What do you think of Professor Snape?”

“Oh, he’s quite alright. There’s something about him that is very mysterious. It’s sort of, well, dreamy...”

“Hermione!” he managed as his jaw dropped.

“I’m only joking. I think the potion has worn off. Your turn,” she said with a rather cheeky grin as she handed him the potion. He peered into the beaker. The light purple liquid seemed innocent enough, but if Hermione’s reaction was any indication... With a shrug, he brought the beaker to his lips. The taste nearly caused him to drop the glass container. Some sort of strange combination of cauliflower and spoiled milk invaded his senses and overtook his tastebuds. He gagged as the putrid stuff slid down his throat. As it hit his stomach, a strange feeling washed over him. It was as if someone was pressing against his throat. Instinct told him that if he were to make one wrong move or say one false thing, the pressure would increase.

“Alright, go ahead.”

“Ok, Harry, what do *you* think of Professor Snape?”

“He’s a slimy git. You know that.”

“Right,” she paused, as if going over something in her mind. A devilish grin appeared on her face. “Harry, who do you have a crush on?”

He swallowed. Why on earth should she ask that question? His mind cringed at the thought of his answer. Was there anyway he could avoid the question? “Erm.... Er- I-er-like... Could you please ask another question?” he managed to gasp as he felt the pressure on his throat increase ever so slightly.

She gave him a strange look. “What do you think of the Prophecy?”

“It’s somehow related to nearly everything we’ve been doing this year. There’s something strange about the Minister of Magic and I think it ties directly into the Prophecy. Immortality, mind control, it’s probably all a part of it, I just don’t know how.”

“Can you speak Mage?”

“I don’t know,” he sighed. The potion was beginning to wear off. The pressure decreased greatly. “It’s gone. The potion’s worn off.”

Hermione nodded, still looking at him strangely.

Snape stood at the front of the classroom, watching the students try out their potions. When he was satisfied that all of the potions had worn off, he dismissed them.

“I’m heading to the library. I’ve been trying to find out more about Mage,” Hermione said as they reached the top of the stairs. Harry nodded, saying he’d meet her there after he dropped some things off at the dorm.

He went to his dorm room to pick up a few books that he needed for information about the immortality potion. He couldn’t escape the feeling that it was going to be another long night in the library.

Chapter Thirteen- The Power of Three

Someone was banging around in the living room. Harry slowly opened his eyes, allowing them to adjust to the dim light in his room before he dared to venture into the living room. Much to his surprise, Hermione was sitting at the coffee table, going through book after book. She’d flip through a book, sigh in exasperation and slam it down onto the table. He watched her do this to about three books before he cleared his throat, “Um, Hermione?”

“What?” she snapped.

“Is something wrong?”

“Yes! The project for Professor Trelawney is due today and I don’t have it done.”

“What do you mean you don’t have it done? You’ve been researching the Prophecy you found in the journal for weeks!”

“Yes, but I haven’t been able to translate it, so I need to find another prophecy so that I can fulfil her little project and wash my hands of this Divination nonsense.”

“So you’re not going to work on the journal prophecy anymore?”

“Are you mad? Of course I’m going to work on it! I’d never sleep if I didn’t. I just meant for school. Now, help me find something.”

After about twenty minutes, Harry was looking through *Hogwarts: A History* and he found the Prophecy predicting the future of Hogwarts. He pointed it out to Hermione, who quickly snatched it away from him.

“Perfect, this should be good for this stupid project. Honestly, what a waste of time.”

Harry watched as she set up getting to work on her paper. She laid the book out where the prophecy was written, followed by several pieces of parchment. She picked up her quill, bit the end and then dipped it into the well. Much to his surprise, Hermione stood the quill on her paper and began reciting a few lines of her report. Harry watched as the quill scratched across the page.

“Hermione! A Quick Quotes Quill?”

“Yes, well sometimes, you need to use whatever methods necessary. Professor Trelawney will never know and I’ll get my high marks. Everyone benefits in the end.”

“What have you done with Hermione?”

“Honestly, Harry, it’s me. I’ve just realised a few things this year and one of the most important may be that sometimes you don’t have to take everything so seriously.”

“And you ask if I’m mad? What’s gotten into you?”

“Like I said, I’m learning to prioritize.”

“You mean school isn’t a priority anymore?”

“Well, of course school is a priority, it’s just the Professor Trelawney’s stupid project isn’t. And besides, this is just a backup. I’ve prepared a full status report on the other Prophecy. This is just in case that isn’t good enough for her.”

Harry stood up, shaking his head as he walked back into his bedroom. Hermione was the epitome of the saying ‘The more things change, the more they stay the same.’ He changed into his school robes after showering and went to his desk, where his presentation materials were lying. He gathered his things and headed back into the living room, where Hermione was just finishing her paper. She grinned at him.

“Are you ready for the day?”

“Of course.”

“Have you packed yet?”

“Erm-packed?”

“Yes, you know, packed. Remember, we’re leaving tonight?”

Harry groaned, of course, he’d totally forgotten. Arabella had some surprise for them. Today was the last day of term, but the IMS students would not be enjoying

traditional Easter holidays. They were being sequestered for the week, though no one save Arabella knew why.

He turned back to his room, followed closely by Hermione. She handed him the list of things that he would need for the week.

Muggle Clothes

Textbooks for History of Magic and Muggle Studies

Toiletries

Entertainment (deck of playing cards, chess set, etc. All must be Muggle-made)

The list continued on for a bit. “Why do we need Muggle clothes?” Harry asked, turning to face Hermione.

“I’m not sure, I wish I knew, but I don’t.”

Harry placed everything he would need onto his bed. When he had finished collecting the various items, he waved his hand quickly over everything, shrinking it all so that it would fit in a small duffle bag.

He set the bag by Hermione’s, which was waiting by the door, and they walked to the classroom together.

The first thing Harry noticed was the peculiar smell wafting out of the classroom. They walked inside and Hermione was disgusted when she saw that the classroom had been transformed so that it was more like the Divination Tower. The sickeningly sweet smell of burning incense, the heat from the fire and the dim, smoky atmosphere mimicked that of Trelawney’s classroom.

Harry and Hermione sat at their usual desks, right behind Ginny and Cadence. Ginny turned around and looked at Hermione, who rolled her eyes towards the ceiling. Like Hermione, Ginny had opted out of taking Divination in her third year, and she too felt that Divination was largely a waste of time.

“Good morning students. If you are all here, we may begin,” Professor Trelawney said airily, as she turned to face them from her spot at the window. “Draco Malfoy, if you would please go first.”

Draco walked to the front of the classroom and pulled a thick parchment from his robe. He began his presentation by reading an ancient sounding prophecy that predicted the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. He went into great details on the specific events mentioned by the prophecy.

Akilah was next. She gave a fascinating presentation of the events leading up to the American Revolution and a series of prophecies that predicted the entire war.

Ginny discussed World War II and the defeat of Grindelwald.

When it was Hermione’s turn, she walked briskly to the front of the room and pulled from her pocket the folded parchment that they had discovered. Clearing her throat,

she began reading from it aloud, the foreign words rolling off of her tongue in a symphony of sound that seemed to awaken something within Harry.

The melodious sounds of the language echoed in his mind as he felt himself being pulled through time, drawn to an ancient world of magic. He knew that within the deepest recesses of his mind, no, his *soul*, what the words meant, yet he was still unable to translate them.

A quick glance around the room revealed the Draco seemed to be experiencing the same sort of sensation. Hermione looked to be at the same level, though the surprised look on her face was obvious. She had not been expecting to be able to recite the Prophecy without so much as a stutter, that much was apparent.

She concluded the Prophecy and snuck a glance at Professor Trelawney, who had her eyebrows raised. “Ms. Granger, if I may ask, what did that mean?”

“I-I’m not entirely sure. I found this Prophecy and have been trying to translate it and puzzle it out since you assigned this project. I have been unsuccessful so far, but I’ve prepared a presentation about my progress on the research so far.”

“Ms. Granger, this is not a progress report. The assignment called for a finished presentation today. Do you have a finished presentation on this Prophecy?”

“No, Professor Trelawney.”

“Then you fail. Next please.”

“But Professor Trelawney!”

“I said, ‘Next please.’”

Hermione looked angry enough to perform some accidental magic; however, she resumed her seat as Harry walked towards the front of the classroom.

“Er, at the end of my, er, third year, Professor Trelawney gave what Professor Dumbledore and I believe was an accurate prediction. She foreshadowed the resurrection of Voldemort and the return of his servant,” he said quickly. Realizing he was talking too fast, Harry took a deep shuddering breath and continued through his presentation, reading aloud Trelawney’s words and analyzing the entire Prophecy.

When he had finished, he was greatly shocked by the applause from his fellow classmates. Even Trelawney looked pleased. By lunchtime, they had finished the presentations and everyone made their way towards the Great Hall, anxious to enjoy lunch with other friends for the first meal in a very long time.

“Oi, Harry! Hermione! Over here!” Ron waved to both of them. He and Lavender had broken up around Valentine’s Day and since then, Ron and Hermione had at least been on speaking terms. Their friendship still remained fractured, but Harry considered it to be a good thing that Hermione wasn’t ready to kill Ron at the slightest move.

Ginny and the other Gryffindors soon joined them and Harry ate his lunch contentedly, happy to be enjoying the company of his friends before everyone left on Easter Holidays. The conversation ranged from what the IMS students were going to be doing to how Mrs. Weasley was fairing with the company of Pip, Daryl and Crookshanks.

“I have one last thing I’d like to cover today before you all leave for your special Easter trip. Can anyone give me a brief history of the Triwizard Tournament?”

Hermione thrust her hand violently into the air.

“Other than the basics. I mean the early history, such as why the Tournament was started to begin with.”

Hermione’s hand dropped from the air and she leaned forward a bit, anxious to hear information that she had not previously come across in a book.

“As you all know, the Triwizard Tournament is a competition between the three best schools in the wizarding world. It is a bit outdated that we have Hogwarts, Durmstrang, and Beauxbatons, as there is at least one American school that is better than Beauxbatons, but I digress. Anyway, the three schools did not start the competition as some sort of friendly contest. Before any of the schools were ever founded, there was an Ancient Prophecy that predicted the rise of the greatest evil the world will ever know and that it would be defeated by a Power made up of three people. Each of these three people would be strongest in the most vital areas: heart, mind and soul. As the schools were built and developed their own curriculum and personalities, it came to be that each school represented one of these three traits. Hogwarts was seen as largely representative of the soul, Beauxbatons the heart, and Durmstrang the mind.”

“But, Arabella, I thought Durmstrang was a school based largely on the Dark Arts?” asked Ginny.

“It is, today. Back then, it was the school of the intelligentsia. Durmstrang turned out students that were cold, hard intellectuals who excelled in the powers of logic. Beauxbatons had a reputation of creating students who felt wholly with their hearts and based many of their actions purely on emotion. Hogwarts was the middle ground.”

“Why didn’t they teach them to work together instead of against each other?” asked Katie Bell.

“Ask Harry. The Triwizard Champions always end up working together; it’s the way of the world. Though they are all competing for the same cup and the same honour, they are also competing for life, a bond that unites them in their quest.”

“Oh my, look at the time!” Arabella interrupted herself, peering at the clock on the wall. “If you’d all meet back in the common room in fifteen minutes, we’ll leave.”

Everyone bustled around, getting their things together and leaving the classrooms. Hermione was clutching a piece of paper in her hand; she had obviously been taking notes.

Harry and Hermione headed into their room. Hermione went to her suitcase and opened it before dashing back into her bedroom. He heard her scurrying about, evidently gathering last minute things. She walked back into the living room a few minutes later carrying an armload of books.

“Are those the books on your Prophecy?”

“I think that the information that Arabella gave us about the Triwizard Tournament somehow relates to it. I’m sure we’ll have plenty of free time this week, so there’s no point in wasting valuable study time.”

Harry rolled his eyes and after she had packed all of her books, he picked up her suitcase and carried everything out into the common room. A few others straggled in after them.

“Great, you’re all here. Ok, first thing, everyone take out your wand,” she waited as they all did so, “Ok, now, give them to me; you won’t be using them this week.”

No one moved an inch. “Arabella, why can’t we just hold onto them, you know, just in case...” Ginny asked.

“Just in case or not, you will not be allowed to use your wands for the entire week. Should you be in danger, I’ll be there. And besides you have three students in your midst that can perform wandless magic. I wouldn’t be too worried, Ginny. Now, your wands,” she commanded with a firmer tone than before, her hand outstretched.

Reluctantly, the ten students turned over their wands. Arabella directed them towards the entrance hall and outside. A few of the horseless carriages were waiting for them. Arabella helped them get into the carriages before sending them on their way.

“I’ll see you all tomorrow morning!” she called out, waving as they departed.

Harry turned to look at Hermione, “Where do you suppose we’re going?”

“I’ve no idea.”

As the words came out of her mouth, a small click sounded in the carriage.

“Afternoon everyone! Just thought I’d fill you all in on what you’ll be doing. Today, you’re heading to Hogsmeade, where you’ll take the Hogwarts Express to London. You’ll be spending the night in Diagon Alley and tomorrow morning, you’ll take another train to where you’re going to be spending the rest of your holidays. I’ll see you all in Diagon Alley tomorrow morning.”

Another click and Harry was left with Hermione, Ginny and Cadence all looking at him questioningly.

“What?” he asked, looking back at all of them.

“Nothing,” Cadence answered.

The carriage dipped back into silence as they approached Hogsmeade station. When the carriages pulled up, they all unloaded their things and walked to the platform. The Hogwarts Express was waiting for them, Harry noticed that several other carriages had pulled up behind them and he remembered that the train was taking all of the homebound Hogwarts students as well. Collectively, the group moved towards the front of the train, securing two compartments up front.

After about forty-five minutes, Harry felt the familiar motion of the train beginning to move. They were on their way.

The train ride to London was relatively uneventful. They were visited occasionally by other Hogwarts students, but they were left mostly alone. When they arrived in London, they exited the train with the masses of students, all looking for family members.

After carrying their things off of the train, they exited Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. As they stood waiting, for what they knew not, the platform emptied, the numbers of students dwindling until the IMS students were alone. Harry turned to look down the platform as they heard footsteps approaching.

A tall, blond woman with a long face and an even longer neck was walking towards them. She held her head high, handbag clutched tightly under her arm. Her hair was coiffed perfectly and Harry couldn't help but notice that she turned her nose up at them. As she drew closer, his mind instantly placed her.

“Erm A-Aunt Petunia?”

“Hello, children. My dear friend, Mrs. Arabella Figg has asked me to escort you to some restaurant on Charring Cross Road. My name is Petunia Dursely,” she nodded at them as she said this, avoiding the stares from Harry and Hermione. As she turned to lead them from the platform, she caught Harry's gaze and winked, ever so slightly.

The group of witches and wizards followed her, looking out of place in their school robes as they walked behind the pristinely dressed Muggle. They all squeezed into three taxicabs and drove to the Leaky Cauldron.

‘Petunia’ left them at the entrance admonishing Harry to “Be on your best behaviour” as she climbed back into the waiting taxi.

Arabella woke them early the next morning, calling out that they needed to get ready to go. “Merlin knows we wouldn't want to miss the train, though heaven forbid that the British Rail ever run the trains on schedule.”

Harry rubbed the sleep out of his eyes as he dressed and grabbed his belongings. The group was standing around in the hallway, waiting for further instruction. Arabella directed them downstairs to more taxis.

An hour and a half later, they were still waiting for their train to Yatton.

“Once we get to Yatton, we’ll take a taxi to the town of Clevedon.”

“Arabella?”

“Yes, Draco?”

“Why are we going to Wales? Is it so Potter can get a girlfriend? I hear they have lots of sheep there.”

“Draco, shut it,” Hermione said from Harry’s side, as she grasped his arm to prevent his lunge at Draco.

Their train was finally called and everyone took out their rail passes.

Everyone except Harry, Hermione and Arabella seemed daunted by the Muggle rail. They created a small scene boarding the train and after Arabella had settled Draco down (He’d been close to throttling the gentleman directing the train passengers to their seats.), everyone settled in for the train ride.

“Why do you suppose we’re going to Clevedon? Isn’t it just some boring Muggle town? And why do we have to take the train to Yatton, couldn’t we just apparate there straight from London?” Ginny pummelled Hermione with questions.

“Gin, do I look like Arabella? I honestly have no answer for any of those questions.”

Ginny settled back into her seat with an annoyed sigh and stared out the window at the green hills rolling by.

About an hour and a half later, the train rolled into Yatton. Everyone stood and began preparing to disembark from the train. Harry pulled his bag down from the shelf above the seats and got into the line that had formed in the aisle. Hermione squeezed in behind him and they followed Arabella out onto the platform. Once the entire group had assembled, she led them out onto the street, where they hailed three taxi cabs to take them to their destination.

Harry didn’t find anything particularly wonderful about the small town but Hermione fell in love with it on site.

“Harry, look at all the wonderful Victorian style houses!” She cried, pointing out the structures.

“Nice,” Harry muttered. The taxi pulled into the driveway of a blue Victorian. Though he really wasn’t into architecture, Harry had to admit that the house was pretty interesting and he did like the wrap-around porch. The other two taxis pulled up right

behind them and Harry was grateful that this would be the last time he would be hauling his luggage around for the week.

Hermione and Ginny led the way inside while Arabella paid the drivers. They opened the creaky, ornately carved front door. Harry heard Ginny gasp as they entered and he understood why when he walked through the front door.

As far as entryways went, this one was incredible. It spanned the two stories of the house and displayed a grand curved staircase. All of the wood in the house was dark walnut and polished. Harry craned his neck to get a better view of the house. Eight doors led off the hallway upstairs. Off the main entryway, Harry noticed a dining room, a parlour, a music room and another hallway that led to the back of the house.

“Ok, here’s the deal. From this point on, you are all officially Muggles. That means no magic-at all. You have to cook for yourselves, clean for yourselves, wear muggle clothes, all that. You can watch television and listen to the radio. You’re pretty much free to do whatever you like. I’ve decided to pair you up, for a change from the usual. The person I pair you with will be your roommate. You’ll sleep in the same room and share a bathroom, so I suggest you do your best to get along with one another. Harry and Draco. Your room is at the top of the stairs, third door on the left.”

Draco groaned louder than Harry and led the way up the stairs.

“Oh, flowers. Honestly,” Draco had reached the room before Harry and was rather upset to see that the entire room was done in an awful floral décor.

“Maybe they think we’re old ladies.”

“Right, you’re an old lady, Potter. I’m going to go change,” he declared as he took one of the bags into the bathroom.

Shaking his head, Harry used a bit of magic to unpack his suitcase. After all, he had shrunk everything. He pulled on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and went back downstairs.

Hermione was sitting in the kitchen, dressed in a grey skirt and a white button down shirt. She smiled at him from her spot at the kitchen table, where she was watching some television. Ginny and Katie Bell came shortly after Harry and Cadence and Akilah were right behind them. The others eventually showed up and gathered around to watch “that thing that muggles are always going on about”.

Harry was explaining to Katie about British daytime talk shows when they heard a clunk, followed by a rattle, punctuated by a jangle. The odd combination of sounds repeated itself a few times before Harry realised it was someone walking down the stairs. They all rushed into the entryway just as Draco was making his way down the stairs. Hermione burst out laughing first.

It was a chain reaction. Within moments, nine out of the ten best and brightest witches and wizards in all of the UK were in a heap in the entryway, laughing fit to die. Harry was the first to gather himself enough to speak.

“Erm, Draco?”

“What?”

“I don’t think auditions for Butch Cassidy are until next week.”

This brought around more laughter. Draco was standing at the bottom of the stairs in full cowboy regalia. A blue button down shirt, with red embroidery on the chest, jeans, brown leather chaps, complete with fringe, cowboy boots, spurs, and of course, a white hat, completed his cowboy ensemble. Arabella came in a few moments later, looking rather startled. She saw Draco and started shaking her head.

“Honestly Draco! Leather chaps! A Stetson! Where did you find those clothes?”

“One of the house elves sent them to me! I sent an owl home about a week ago for muggle clothes and this is what I got, is there something wrong with this outfit?” he asked, his voice full of indignation.

“Nothing at all, if we were playing ‘Draco Goes West’, which we aren’t.”

“This is all I have with me!”

“So borrow some clothes from Harry,” Arabella suggested.

“I most certainly will not!” Draco sputtered at the same time that Harry cried out “No way! Those are my clothes; it’s not my fault he’s dressed like a cowboy!”

“Alright, then it’s settled. Draco, you’re just going to have to wear the cowboy clothes.”

“But Arabella-“

“Nope, sorry, nothing to do about it. Perhaps you should have done your homework a little better, this is just a lesson to be learned.”

Draco stared at her retreating back. He turned to Hermione, “Granger! Is there anyway to make me presentable?”

“I don’t know, Draco, I rather like those leather chaps. You should stick with them.” She giggled and turned back towards the kitchen. Harry sniggered at Draco one last time before following her out. No sooner had the door closed behind them that Hermione burst into laughter.

“Did you see those chaps? With the fringe? Oh, how priceless!”

“I liked the embroidered shirt myself. And the boots.”

“Oh the boots! Honestly, do you think that house elves were playing a joke on him?”

“Could be.”

“Oi! Did you see the handkerchief tied around his neck?” said Ginny as she came into the kitchen, clutching her sides.

“The spurs were definitely my favourite!” responded Cadence.

“Really, Draco trusts me far too much,” Akilah said with a giggle.

“What did you do?” Harry asked.

“Well, about a week ago, he asked if I would owl the house elves to send him some muggle clothes. I was in a, ahem, playful mood, so I sent an owl asking for cowboy clothes.”

“Oh Akilah! Really, how are you a Gryffindor? You think like a Slytherin,” said Hermione through her giggles.

“I know, I know,” replied Akilah with a smile.

Draco walked into the kitchen, fixing everyone with glares. “Not a word, any of you. Now, where can I find tea?”

“Well, if I could take a guess, there’s probably tea in the cupboard, a kettle on the stove, milk in the refrigerator and sugar on the table,” Hermione answered.

Draco nodded and walked towards the stove, where he picked up the kettle and carried it to the sink.

Everyone turned their attention to the television as Draco stood staring at the sink. A few moments passed.

“Hermione?” came Draco’s voice from the sink.

“What?” she said, not turning from the television.

“I have the kettle.”

“Yes?”

“Now what?”

“Turn on the tap.”

“Erm-“

“Oh, hold on,” she stood up and walked over to the sink, taking the kettle from Draco. “Turn on the tap. Like this. Put water in the kettle. Then walk this kettle over to the stove and turn the knob onto medium. When this whistles,” she held up the kettle, “pour the water into that mug. Then put a tea bag in it. Simple enough?”

He gave her a dirty look as he nodded, snatching the kettle away from her.

“Draco, do you need some help? I was going to make some tea for myself as well,” Ginny said as she stood up from the table.

“Sure,” Draco mumbled as she took the kettle from him and put water into it. She told him to grab mugs for everyone that wanted tea. He did so and she walked over to the refrigerator to get milk.

“Ah!”

“Ginny! Is something wrong?” Harry jumped up from the table.

“What on earth was that?” she said, pointing at the refrigerator.

“What was what?” Harry walked over and opened the door, expecting something to jump out at him.

“The light! Where did it come from?”

He narrowed his eyes at her, “Do you guys have any idea about anything muggle?”

Eight heads shook silently, as everyone had now turned to watch the drama near the refrigerator. Harry sighed.

“Mione, I suppose we ought to explain some basic things to everyone so that they don’t accidentally blow the house up trying to use the microwave.”

“Good idea. I guess this is as good a place to start as any,” she stood up and pointed at the television. Briefly, she explained the television and what it was (“No, there aren’t tiny people in the box.”). Harry explained about the kitchen appliances as everyone began drinking their tea. When they had finished, they moved onto the living room, going over electricity and other things that were widely used by muggles, most of which the group had never seen the likes of.

In the corner of the living room, a computer was tucked into a cabinet. Hermione opened the cabinet, pulling out the desk and switching the machine on. As Windows booted, Draco watched in amazement.

“That’s bloody fantastic! What can you do on that?”

“I’m actually surprised that they have one here, they’re pretty rare to have. Dead useful, really, you can play games, type-“

“What’s type?” Katie asked.

“Oh, it’s, well, you use the keyboard and you can write, like on parchment, only, well--different.”

They all nodded. Ginny jumped as the computer made a noise that announced it had fully loaded. Hermione clicked on the desktop, bringing up different games and the

word processing program. Even Harry watched in interest, for he had only seen Dudley use his computer a few times, and he'd never had a go on it.

Within minutes, a card game had loaded and Hermione was showing them all how to play.

"That was a great nap. There's a nice breeze coming in from outside, it smells lovely. Perhaps we could all walk down to the beach later and do a little site seeing." Arabella strolled into the room and peeked over Hermione's shoulder at the computer screen.

They nodded their agreement and turned back to the computer, where Hermione had just started another game.

After about half an hour or so, a few of the students bored of the computer and went to other parts of the house in search of entertainment. Ginny returned with a game of Scrabble and complained about the lack of moving parts for about ten minutes. Draco had found some videos and was attempting to put them in the video machine. Katie, Akilah and Cadence were building a house out of playing cards. Cadence whooped at their success, "Would you look at that? They don't explode! That's brilliant!"

Cho was watching a game of football on the television and during commercials, threatened to kill Draco if he so much as touched the video machine again (he had unplugged something on the television that had caused Cho to miss a part of her game).

The week wore on in a very relaxed fashion. The first part of their trip had been spent enjoying muggle activities and the unusually nice weather. They had gone shopping in the small village, taken walks along the beaches, played outdoor games, and spent a lot of time in the library reading muggle books.

During the second half of the week, the group devoted much of their time to reading about muggle and magical history and making comparisons. Hermione had been fascinated by the cause and effect relationship between the two worlds and had made correlations between more obscure events that they were reading about.

"Arabella, there really isn't much information on the Founding, so how exactly are we supposed to take a test on it?" Hermione asked. They were sitting on the front porch, going through some materials on History of Magic.

"Well, actually, we don't really have much information on the Founding of Hogwarts. It's somewhat of a mystery. Obviously, we know about the four Founders and how they each sponsored a house that was based on the characteristics that they prized most in themselves and their students, but as far as how the school was built, it's very vague."

"What do you mean, how it was built?"

“Well, ask Draco, for example. Malfoy Manor is a magical building, that’s what makes it Unplottable. I, obviously, don’t know the details on how it was built, as its centuries old. Hogwarts was built by some magical means. There’s magic ingrained in every stone in that castle.”

Hermione nodded and went back to her reading.

“I think I’m going for a walk, does anyone want to come?” Arabella asked.

“I’ll go,” Harry said, standing up.

“Ginny, Cadence, Cho and I are going to play Scrabble,” said Padma.

“I’ve got some more work to do for the Curses and Hexes paper,” Akilah said.

“I’m helping her,” said Katie.

“I’m going back on the computer, I found this fabulous game where you fly around some sort of muggle contraption,” spoke up Susan.

“I guess I’ll go, I think I’m getting a bit of a headache from all this reading,” Hermione said quietly. Everyone turned to her in shock, “What?” she asked sceptically.

“Nothing, nothing at all,” Harry jumped in.

“Draco?” Arabella asked, turning towards the boy who was perched on the edge of the porch, staring moodily out into the yard. He was wearing another embroidered shirt, except in black, and ever since the first day he had forgone the hat, chaps and handkerchief.

“Ha, as if I’d be caught out in these clothes.”

“The other days we’ve gone out, you’ve worn your Bonanza costumes,”

“Yes, well, that was different.”

“Alrighty, are you two ready?” Arabella asked Harry and Hermione, giving Draco a strange look at the same time.

They stood and walked towards the street. Strolling for a bit and taking in the sea air, they walked in silence for some time.

“Arabella, why did Ami pick us up in London?” Hermione asked suddenly.

“Oh, she was on a mission for Dumbledore, it seems that the Petunia disguise has been more useful than we ever thought.”

“Yes, but she’s under Fidelius. How were we able to see her?”

“Ami is under Fidelius. Petunia Dursely is not. Her guise allows her to go out. Your parents can do the same thing.”

“How are my parents?”

“They’re doing wonderfully. They’ve been in charge of research since they came back to work for us. The years that your parents and Ami were in hiding, their activities were very limited, for obvious reasons, but lately, they’ve been priceless. We think we’re getting closer. Dumbledore suspects that in a few months, we’ll know exactly Voldemort’s place in things and whether or not we’re in a war.”

Hermione considered this. “I don’t know if you suspect something, but I wondered whether or not something seemed fishy about Minister Connelly.”

“Dumbledore doesn’t think we have any reason to suspect him of anything related to the Death Eaters. He doesn’t like some of the things that have been going on in the Ministry, but there isn’t much he can do about it.”

“What about Sirius and Remus?”

“Hermione, you’re just full of questions today.”

“Well, we haven’t heard anything. I figured that after our meeting with Dumbledore, we’d at least get updates on everyone, but I haven’t heard anything in months. In fact, I haven’t even talked to my parents in a few weeks.”

“You have that mind link too?” Harry asked, coming out of his silence.

“Of course, it’s a by product of the spell.”

Arabella updated them a bit on what was going on with the Order. They eventually circled back to the house. The others were sitting in the kitchen watching Ginny and Draco attempt to make dinner.

“No! We don’t put the pasta in yet! The water isn’t even boiling!” cried Ginny.

“Well, the pot has been on the stove for twenty minutes!” Draco said pointedly.

“Did you turn the fire on?”

He considered this before tingeing slightly pink. “No. I’ll do that,” he mumbled.

Ginny shook her head as she stirred the sauce. Padma and Susan were slicing vegetables for a salad as they watched Ginny and Draco bicker. The group listened intently as Ginny explained to Draco that they couldn’t just run the noodles under hot water to cook them. Draco tried to argue but was cut off by Arabella.

“The pair of you fight like you’re married.”

All conversation came to a dead stop. Ginny was staring at Arabella with her jaw hanging open and her face bright red as Draco sputtered soundlessly.

“Her! Me? Never!” he stuttered, regaining his power of speech.

“Oh, Draco, don’t get all in a tizzy, it’s not that big of a deal.”

“I would never date Ginny!”

“And why wouldn’t you?” blurted out Ginny, getting rather huffy.

He didn’t answer and the silence in the kitchen was very tense. After a minute or so, Katie abruptly stood up from the table.

“I think the water is boiling, perhaps you should put the pasta in.”

This galvanized everyone into action. Draco went about getting the pasta, Ginny stirred the sauce, and a few others went around gathering plates, napkins and flatware.

As it was their last night in Clevedon, dinner was a big affair. They sat at the table for hours, talking and laughing and enjoying the good food. Ginny and Draco had pulled off a magnificent meal that filled everyone. The large, summery kitchen was filled with good smells and laughter until late into the night.

“Arabella, when we go back tomorrow, what are we going to be doing?” asked Susan through a yawn.

“We’ll be reviewing for the OWLs. I’ve got plenty of work and research for you to do.”

“What are the OWLs going to be like?”

“It’ll be a surprise. You’ll just have to wait and see.”

Chapter Fourteen- Underground

“This is damn near impossible! I don’t understand how they expect us to remember everything from the past five years!” Ron stood in the centre of Gryffindor common room, surrounded by various thick textbooks. He was holding a parchment in his hand, apparently from Professor McGonagall, that had a complete list of everything that would be on his Transfiguration exam.

Harry was sitting on one of the sofas in front of the fireplaces, watching his friend pacing back and forth, throwing a temper tantrum. He had been in Gryffindor Tower for about two hours, attempting to help Ron with some last minute studying. Even though Hermione and Ron could now be in the same room, and occasionally hold a conversation, Hermione still wasn’t willing to spend several hours helping him study information that he should have been studying all year. She had been reluctant to do it when they were on the best of terms, so Harry hadn’t expected her to jump at the chance to help Ron now.

“Ron, I think it may be a checklist, you know, to make sure that you at least have a general idea about everything on that list. I don’t think it means she’s definitely going to be testing you on it. May I see it?”

Ron tossed him the parchment and Harry looked at the list. In fact, there were small stars next to the topics that were bold.

“I think these stars mean it’s important. Just go over the starred items first, and when you’re confident with those, go over the others. Just break it down and tackle it bit by bit, it’ll go much quicker.”

“You sound like Herm.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve studied like mad this year, usually with her; she’s bound to rub off.”

Ron nodded and waved goodbye to Harry as he stood up to leave. It was nearing ten o’clock and Arabella had told them that they needed to be in by then. He said goodbye to his other friends and headed out the portrait door.

The common room was strangely quiet and dark. A small fire glowed in the hearth, as it had become warmer and the need for it had declined. Harry walked quietly to his room and when he opened the door, he found Hermione sitting on the lounge, holding her head in her hands with her elbows rested on her knees. She was clearly crying.

“Hermione? Are you all right?” He asked, crossing the room to her in two long strides.

"I'm-fine," she sniffed. He sat next to her and opened his arms. Crawling into them, she began crying a little more. "Oh, Harry, I was trying to finish up the project and I needed one more example and I-I found out about my parents."

He was shocked. They rarely talked about her parents having been in hiding and he had never known that anything about them was ever published. "What did you find?"

"Oh, just about how they disappeared. I guess everyone thought they had been killed by Voldemort and the Death Eaters had never denied it. I just-I think about all they lost when they left the wizarding world. There was a picture of all of them at some big party. Here," she handed him the book from the coffee table. When he looked at the picture, his breath caught in his throat.

In a black and white moving photo, he saw his parents, Sirius, Remus, Ami, Arabella and the Grangers, all dressed in Muggle formal wear. It was some sort of costume party and they all stood, arms looped around one another, smiling and waving. It looked like it had been taken shortly after his parents and friends had left Hogwarts. Ami looked to be about twenty and Hermione's parents looked to be about the same age.

"I didn't know they were all friends like that."

"Well, what did you think?" she said, laughing through her tears.

"I don't know, I know they all worked together, I guess you just don't picture your parents with their friends, do you know what I mean?"

"Yes."

"Wait, when was this picture taken?"

"1978. Why?"

Without a word, Harry walked to his room and went to his trunk. After rooting around for a bit, he found what he was looking for and walked back to where Hermione was sitting.

"Look," he handed her the album that Hagrid had given him at the end of first year. "They got married in 1979. Your parents were still in the wizarding world, so they must be in there. I can't believe I never noticed them before!"

Hermione was flipping through the pages, "Oh, Harry! You were such a cutie petutie!" She had paused to look at one of his baby pictures.

The look of horror on his face caused her to laugh even

harder. As she chuckled, he narrowed his eyes, giving her a bit of a glare.

"Right, we aren't looking for me. Here, let me see that," he winced, taking the book from her. He went to their wedding pictures and showed her the photos of the guests.

Sure enough, her parents were there, dancing right along side everyone else. He showed her the pictures and leaned back as she took the book back. "Oh, Harry, this is so sweet. Look how happy they all are. I guess in those days, there really wasn't much to celebrate."

"I guess so."

Unconscious of her actions, Hermione leaned back against him, holding the book so that they could both look through it. Harry had looked through the book in great detail when Hagrid had given it to him, but it was a rare occasion now when he pulled out the book. They flipped through the pages together, Hermione pointing out people she recognized. "Look how handsome Professor Lupin is!"

Groaning, Harry flipped the page. He had never looked much at the picture on the next page. It hadn't seemed very interesting in a passing glance, but now he took a closer look. His mum was talking to Rachel Granger, who was giggling and grasping Lily's hand as she did so. His dad and Rick Granger were talking, most likely very loudly, and waving their arms about. Harry guessed by the motions that his dad was making, that they were talking about Quidditch. Occasionally, Lily would glance over at her husband lovingly. Rachel would follow her glance and laugh, shaking her head.

"It's so sweet to see them in love," Hermione said quietly.

He gazed down at her, looking fully into her eyes. She smiled up at him; a small smile that barely moved her lips, but lit up her eyes all the same. He returned her smile and felt himself drawing closer. For the first time in months, he was close enough to feel her breath flutter against his face, close enough to smell her.

He ached for the closeness they had once shared and for the friendship that had changed in the smallest ways since Christmas. He watched as she took in a deep breath and let it out in a half-sigh. He leaned closer, the need to kiss her overpowering all his other emotions.

Just as he was about to kiss her, he stopped, looking into her eyes once more, searching for some sort of confirmation, an affirmation to continue. In that split-second, the moment passed and she moved back from him.

"I think I'm going to bed, I'm exhausted," she said as she yawned.

"Right. I guess I'll turn in too. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, Harry," she said, standing up and retreating slowly towards her room.

"Good night, Mione," he whispered, longing to follow her, but turning into his own room instead.

The loud rapping on Harry's bedroom door jolted him from his dreamless sleep. He bolted out of bed and to the door, where he found Arabella standing. "Get dressed,

grab a few days worth of supplies and be in the common room in ten minutes," she said before turning and going out of the door. Harry could hear Hermione moving around, obviously getting ready to go, as he fumbled about trying to get dressed.

He pulled a black t-shirt over his head and looked at the clock. Grumbling, he snatched his glasses off of the side table and saw that it was nearly four in the morning. He threw a few changes of clothes into his backpack, along with a comb and his toothbrush. He opened one of the bureau drawers, searching for anything else he might need and his eyes fell upon the Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder's Map. Instinct had Harry tossing both items into his bag. He zipped it shut and slung it over his shoulder.

Walking out to the kitchen, he grabbed a couple of bottles of water from the fridge. He wondered to himself if he would need to take anything to eat and, just in case, grabbed a box of crackers from the cupboard.

Hermione strode into the room, her backpack over her shoulder and her hair pulled up into a messy ponytail. She looked wide awake and began rummaging through the cupboards, throwing various snack foods into her bag.

"Any idea what's going on?"

"No idea."

He turned to face her. "Do you think we've been called on a mission?"

"It's entirely possible. I guess we'll know in a few minutes."

She tossed another bottle of water into her bag and led the way out into the common room. The rest of the students were standing around, clutching backpacks. Their question was immediately answered.

"We have been ordered on a mission. Dumbledore has asked us to assist in an operation. I will be splitting you into two groups and then further explaining your jobs."

"Arabella, this was not part of the program requirements!" Susan objected.

"You knew very well that when you came into this program that you would be beginning auror training. Consider this training. If you don't want to go, you can walk out of this room immediately, because you will no longer be in my program," she pointed towards the door and gave everyone a stern look. "Anyone else?" She looked at them with her eyebrows raised, "Very well. The two groups. Akilah, Draco, Padma, Harry and Hermione, you're the first group. Ginny, Cadence, Cho, Katie and Susan, the second."

The members of the two groups rearranged themselves silently while Arabella looked over a parchment in her hands. After a few silent, tension filled moments, she snapped her head up to meet the anxious gazes of her students.

“We have received confirmation from our spies within the Death Eaters that there is some sort of mass mobilization occurring. We aren’t positive as to what it means or what exactly is going on, which is why you have been split in to two groups. The first group,” she turned to meet Harry’s unwavering gaze, “is our infiltration group, which I will explain further in a moment. The second group is in charge of intelligence. You have been grouped based on your abilities and our reasoning behind using the ten of you is simple: it’s easier and many of you are much stronger than we had ever imagined. Harry, Hermione, and Draco, the three of you are capable of wandless magic, which is necessary for this because we know for a fact that all Death Eater hideouts have magical detection wards. However, wandless magic is very hard to trace and detect. Akilah and Padma are grouped with you for their logic and reasoning skills. The rest of you are in charge of getting in there, finding out as much as you can and getting back here without using magic. Any wandless magic you can use is fine, but we’ll give you the proper supplies so that you should be able to operate without it.”

Harry felt his pulse quickening as she continued. They were being sent on an actual mission. He felt Hermione shift nervously next to him as she cleared her throat.

“Erm, Arabella, I don’t mean to sound silly, but what about the other operatives?”

“They have things to do as well. Do not think you will be moving alone, you will be being watched and guarded and assisted as much as possible. Now, we need to get a move on. The second group needs to go directly to the teacher’s lounge on the third floor, where someone is waiting to assist you. Go now and take these with you,” she waved her hand and paper sacks appeared on the table next to her, along with small pouches. “Anything you may need, in addition to your clothes is in those pouches. Keep them in your bags and be careful.”

The five girls moved to take the supplies she offered and without so much as a word were exiting to the main school building. As soon as they had left, Arabella turned back to them.

“Alright, you five have a different job. You are going to be one of the teams infiltrating the hideouts that we know of. There are two hideouts and we have three teams in each. You will follow a different route in locating the hideout and getting through it to find the Death Eaters. You will meet up with the other two teams and attempt to take down the stronghold. This is a rough mission, especially for ones as inexperienced as you, but Dumbledore believes you can do it. The most I can do for you now is give you the same supplies as the others and direct you to a predetermined spot. From there, you will be responsible for finding the entrance to the hideout. Oh, and these,” she waved her wand again and three tiny buttons appeared. “These are thingies that you can use to contact the other teams. They will only work when you are within 15 yards of the other groups, in any direction, so don’t plan on relying on them too much.”

Hermione cautiously spoke up, “Why are they called thingies? I mean, did you forget the name?”

“No, it’s really an adaptation from what muggles always call various gadgets,” Arabella responded, completely serious. Hermione nodded her head, still giving Arabella a strange look.

They all turned at the approaching footsteps. Professor Dumbledore walked to the assembled group.

“Good morning. I just spoke with the other team on their way to meet with Ami. I was wondering if I could have a few moments with this group, Arabella?”

“Surely, Albus. Go right ahead. I was just giving them their thingies“.

She quickly handed the three buttons to Hermione, Harry and Draco. Padma and Akilah both looked dubious at this, but Arabella quickly explained that they need magic to activate and their wands should only be used if they encounter Death Eaters.

“You are undertaking a very grave mission today. When we began this program, we never expected that we would have to expose you to such dangerous tasks, but alas, you can only be so prepared for the completely unexpected. I want you all to understand how very important this is. We have decided to use you because we feel that you are capable enough to handle this. The most support we can offer you is the thingies, a few supplies, the knowledge that you have learned this year and our hopes for you swift and safe return. Good luck,” he nodded at each of them in turn and left the room just as quickly as he had entered.

Without a word, Arabella pointed them towards the supplies and handed Hermione an old, rusty tin can.

“It’s your portkey. You have 45 seconds, so ready yourselves.”

They all hastened to touch the can, and after what felt like an eternity to Harry, he felt the familiar tug as the room began to spin. He felt himself being pulled through time and space and suddenly his feet hit hard ground and he nearly stumbled, but caught himself quickly. Hermione was not so lucky and she tumbled into him. Catching her in his arms, he looked down at her and saw something that scared him in her bright chocolate eyes.

Among the bravery and security, there was a trace of fear in those eyes. A fear of the unknown and a fear of thought that they would really be using magic, not just practising it in a classroom. As he looked at her, he saw her swallow and take a deep breath, before pushing against his arms and righting herself.

Instinct took over as one of his favourite memories of his best friend flashed through his mind. He bent down to her ear. “You’re a great witch, Hermione, you know that?”

Her eyes glazed over and she smiled nervously. She turned to the rest of the group, asking if they were all okay after their rough landing.

Harry took the opportunity to gather information about their surroundings. Wherever they were, it was bright and sunny, with the scent of wildflowers in the air. They were

on a grassy hill and as Harry turned to look in the distance, he saw they were on some sort of rolling plain. The long grass waved in the soft, summery breeze and had the conditions been different, Harry would have found the place very peaceful and calming. As it was, his heart had started to slow a bit and he was becoming more comfortable with the idea of their mission.

Hermione and Draco were debating their next course of action.

“Obviously, Granger, you think the entrance is going to be easy to find? I can tell you now; there won’t be any signs that say ‘Big Bad Guy Hideout’ with a giant red arrow pointing towards a door. It’s not going to be easy to find.”

“I realize that Malfoy, and as experienced as I’m sure you are with finding Death Eater hideouts, try to keep the condescending tones to a nearly nonexistent level, all right?”

“I don’t know what you’re implying, but you better stop implying it. Now, how are we going to find this entrance?” he sneered at Hermione, who was staring him in the face, holding her arms crossed against her chest.

“I hate to break up this little argument, but if I remember correctly, we do have two animagi with us, both of whom are animals with strong senses of hearing and smell. Perhaps they could comb the area for clues while the rest of us visually search?” Padma suggested as she stepped between Draco and Hermione, while keeping her vision trained on Hermione.

“Padma, that’s an excellent idea. Harry, Hermione, get to it,” Akilah said, slapping Harry hard on the back with a mischievous grin on her face.

He smiled back at her, though it was more of an annoyed, somewhat rude smile. He narrowed his eyes at her briefly before turning to face Hermione. She nodded, as if reading his mind, and Harry closed his eyes, deep in concentration. They hadn’t had an Animagi lesson since before the Easter holiday and he hoped that he could still transform. He pictured each individual animal in his mind, before selecting the best one for this situation. He focused on that particular animal, clearing his mind and centring on his physical form. He felt his limbs begin to stretch and reshape themselves. He felt every part of his body morph until his paws hit the ground.

When he opened his eyes, he could smell the scents of the surrounding area even stronger than before. He looked at the field they were standing in, now completely black and white with an occasional shade of grey thrown in to mix things up a bit. He looked to his right at the long, lean panther standing next to him. The brown eyes of the creature bore into his and he turned back to their group, who were now staring at him and Hermione. Akilah opened her mouth and mumbled something that Harry did not understand. He cocked his head to the side and looked up at her. After hearing something that sounded distinctly like, “Awww!”, Akilah and Padma had closed in on him, scratching behind his black ears. When Padma moved to scratch his brown belly, he stepped back with a small growl and the two girls looked at him disdainfully.

Taking another deep sniff of the air, he moved towards the side of the hill. Hermione went in the opposite direction, both sniffing deeply at the ground as they went. Akilah, Padma, and Draco (who was mumbling something about stupid animals) also went off in different directions, eyes glued to the ground, searching for clues.

As he sniffed at the ground, Harry experienced scents all together knew to him. His mind raced as he took in grass and earth and insects and the wind and every other thing colliding with his nose. He peered back at the group and saw that Hermione had employed the same method as him, which involved keeping her nose to the ground. Sniffing at a tiny white flower poking up from the ground, he caught a whiff of something very foreign in the thousands of smells he was experiencing. It was distinct because it was the smell of human.

He trailed it down the hill until it turned sharply and Harry stopped, once again investigating the area. In the grass, he could barely make out a lightly treaded path. It looked as if several people had tromped through here, not too long ago, either. He bent his head to gather the scent again and followed its sharp odour until he realised that it was beginning to concentrate and become more potent.

Walking a bit further, he realised that the scent did not continue. He turned back, retracing his steps until he picked it up again. He buried his nose into the grass and realised that it was practically imbued in the ground. He let out a loud bark before realising his actions and quickly transformed himself. He saw that Hermione had been tracing the smell as well and was about twenty yards from him. Akilah, Draco and Padma were all rushing towards where the two animals were.

Hermione looked up briefly and loped towards him. She transformed as she and the others met him.

“Harry! You’re so cute! What kind of dog are you?” said Padma, giggling.

“Just a mutt, I suppose, our teacher never really said. Did you really have to pet me?”

“Shut it, Harry, you loved it,” said Draco.

“Shh. Quit arguing. What did you smell?” Hermione asked, looking at Harry.

“People.”

“So did I. It stopped right where you’re standing. That’s where we’ll start.”

They all nodded and dropped to their hands and knees.

Harry was feeling along the ground searching for some sort of clue when he happened to look up and see Draco fall forward and disappear. After recovering from his initial shock, he jumped up and ran to the spot where he had seen Draco. Calling for Hermione, he dropped to his knees and began feeling along the earth.

Without warning he felt himself being dragged downward and suddenly he found himself standing next to Draco.

“Where are we? How did we get down here?”

“I have no idea where we are and I pulled you down here. Look,” he pointed towards the ceiling of the cavern they were in. Harry looked up and saw Hermione, Akilah and Padma standing where he had just been, looking as if they were falling into a state of panic. Hermione bent down to the ground and he heard her call his name. He couldn’t bear the look of fear on her face and reached a hand up into the ceiling.

Much to his surprise, he felt the material of the front of her shirt in his fingers and he pulled her through, catching her as she fell.

“Harry! Oh thank Merlin!” she cried, wrapping her arms around his neck. He hugged her briefly before moving to help Draco pull the other girls through.

When they had all been pulled through the strange portal, the five students stood huddled close together and peered around their newly found surroundings. They were obviously in some sort of cave, that much Harry judged. He watched as Hermione gathered herself and tentatively stepped forward.

They were plunged into darkness as soon as Hermione moved her foot. Harry felt for his wand and grasping it, was just about to whisper the incantation for light when Hermione stopped him.

“We can’t use wands, Harry,” she whispered, barely audible.

“Well, then how do you suggest we see anything?” In response to his question, Harry heard Hermione fumble around. In a few moments, a bright blue light flooded the immediate area and he saw Hermione standing next to him, wide-eyed. She held in her cupped hands, bright blue flames and looked slightly surprised with herself.

“I-I didn’t think it would work,” she blushed slightly. “Does anyone have anything we can put these in?”

“Erm, here...” Akilah was digging around in her backpack and she pulled out a jar of what were unmistakably pickles.

“Pickles? Honestly...” Draco muttered.

Akilah gave him a dirty look as she opened the jar and emptied it. After handing it to Hermione, she walked over to Draco and gave him a playful swat on the arm.

Hermione dumped the flames into the jar, still somewhat amazed at her feat.

“Erm, does anyone know where we are?” Harry asked, taking in his surroundings.

They were in some sort of strange cave. The walls were a strange blue colour and the ground was more earthen than rocky. Harry stepped forward a bit, taking the jar from Hermione and attempting to reach the light into the darkness.

As he looked around, he realised that brightness didn't necessarily come from the flames. Something was reflecting the light. He walked towards the closest wall, his pulse beginning to slow, and his breath deepening as he became more curious than scared.

He realised that Hermione had walked ahead of him and was now brushing her fingers against the cave wall.

"It's limestone. These are crystal formations. This reminds me of a cave my parents and I once visited," she murmured.

The group had moved closer to Harry and Hermione. He brushed away the feeling of uneasiness that washed over him suddenly and turned back to Hermione who was still looking at the walls.

"We're still in Britain. I think. Well, where do we go from here? Shall we explore?" she asked, turning to the group.

"That sounds like a horrible idea. We don't have any equipment," Draco argued.

Hermione gave him a long look before waving her hand at him. "I've got what I need right here. Between the three of us, we should be fine," she said as she shifted her backpack.

"Whatever we do, we need to keep moving. It's dangerous to stay in one spot for too long, we may be being watched," Harry said slowly, looking at each of his classmates in turn.

"I suggest we go that way. It seems logical that the hideout would be deeper underground," Hermione said, pointing towards the tunnel that led downwards.

The group was silent. Slowly, everyone shouldered their backpacks. Draco took the lead, having grabbed the jar from Harry. Akilah and Padma followed him, both with tight grips on his bag. Hermione grasped Harry's hand again and they trudged through the tunnel.

Their route narrowed and Harry found himself bringing up the rear, still holding tightly to Hermione's hand, despite the hurt and protest in his arm. It was becoming darker. The crystal formations that had been in the walls in the area they entered were gone and they were now surrounded by dark, dense rock. Harry saw a bit of light ahead and quickened his pace with the rest of the group. Nearing it, he saw an opening in the tunnel, and soon, they had stepped out into a wide cavern.

"Look!" cried Akilah pointing straight ahead of them. There was no opening across the great room. In every direction, they saw only bare walls.

Hermione stepped away from Harry, walking further into the centre of the room. "When you can't go forward or backward, you go up," she pointed at the wall directly above the archway that they had just stepped through.

Harry moved forward and turned his gaze to where Hermione was pointing. Sure enough, there was a large opening about fifty feet above the entryway.

“Shall we start climbing?” asked Hermione, who looked prepared to conjure ropes and transfigure the rocks from the ground into spelunking gear.

“Granger, at times, you can be disgustingly muggle. Climbing?” Draco said, shaking his head. With a wave of his hand and a few moments of deep concentration, Hermione was floating about ten feet above them.

“Malfoy, put her down,” Harry suggested, having noted the furious look on Hermione’s face. He held his hand out, hoping against all odds that he’d be able to catch her, either magically or physically if Malfoy should drop her.

Draco did quite the opposite, however, choosing instead to levitate her up to the ledge where the other opening was. However, his aim wasn’t on spot and Harry nearly had a heart attack as he saw Hermione sway dangerously on the edge of the ledge. Harry rushed forward, pushing Draco aside and aimed his hand at Hermione. With a heavily concentrated effort, he pushed her forward. She fell onto the rocky landing and Harry grimaced as he heard Hermione swearing. She appeared at the edge, her face red with fury. She held up her hand and a small blast of white light shot out and hit Draco in the arm.

“Dammit Granger! What in the bloody hell was that for?”

“You could have killed me!” she shot back. Wasting no time, Hermione levitated Draco up. She then brought up Harry, Akilah and Padma, all the while scolding Draco.

“Do you know how dangerous that was? You have so little control of the levitation spell, don’t you read books? You could have killed me!”

“Did I? No. So stuff it,” he responded, turning towards the entry and hustling through it.

“Only because Harry saved me! You’re so irresponsible!” she called after him.

“Granger, get off it. You’re fine. Hurry up, the lot of you, we need to keep moving.”

Hermione groaned loudly and followed after him, still lecturing him on the theories of levitation. Harry walked with Akilah and Padma, keeping up with their idle chit chat.

They walked for what felt like hours, going deeper and deeper in the earth. At times, they crawled, the ceiling going so low that the five students were shimmying along on their bellies. At other times, the ceiling stretched high above them and Harry had to strain his eyes to see the top of the tunnel. They weaved their way around great rock formations and cracks in the earth.

Most of their journey was quiet and after awhile, Harry noticed that Akilah and Padma were beginning to slow their pace. They had fallen behind and both seemed to be dragging their feet, looking weary and tired.

“Malfoy, Hermione! We’ve been down here for a pretty long time, maybe we could rest a little?” he suggested to the two classmates walking some distance ahead.

“What’s the matter, Potter, is all the walking hurting your feet?”

“No, Malfoy. Padma and Akilah look pretty knackered though,” he gestured to the two girls who had since collapsed against the wall of the cave.

Malfoy looked at them, shaking his head as he dropped his back to the earthen floor. “It must be a girl thing.”

“Sod off Malfoy,” Hermione said without looking up from her bag. She was kneeling on the dirt floor, looking for something in her pack. She pulled out a bottle of water and an apple. Sighing, she sat back and opened her water, drinking down half the bottle in one go.

Harry watched the line of her throat as she drank, eyeing her profile as she devoured the sustenance of life. He realised he was staring and shook his gaze away from her, turning back to his own bag and digging out a bottle of water.

He settled himself against the rough rock, gulping down his water and leaning his head back against the cool stone. Closing his eyes, he let his mind relax. His senses remained alert, taking in every noise that met his ears. He heard a light beeping noise and his hand instantly went to the small button that Arabella had given them back at the school.

Pulling it from his pocket, he saw it was glowing an eerie green colour. Hermione and Draco had also pulled out their buttons and were staring at them in amazement.

“What do you suppose we should do?” Harry asked, looking at the other two.

“Wait for them to contact us; surely they are getting the same effect.” Hermione turned her button over in her hand as if inspecting it for something. With a shrug, she tucked it back in her pocket and stood up, brushing herself off.

“We need to continue on. There's something amiss. We've been left alone far too long for my liking. We're probably pretty close to the Death Eaters,” Draco said quietly.

Harry whipped around suddenly. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck prick as a cool breeze seemed to blow through the tunnel. With a shiver, he looked at the rest of the group, who all looked as if they had experienced the same feeling.

“I agree with Draco,” Harry said, a little too loudly. The girls looked at him and all nodded in unison.

Everyone regrouped and gathered their things. Akilah and Padma moved to stand by Draco again and Hermione stood waiting for Harry to catch up. When he had reached her, she grabbed for his hand. Together, they all began the descent down the tunnel.

They walked for some time without encountering any obstacles. Harry was beginning to get a bit nervous at the lack of problems that had faced. It seemed, for lack of a better term, *too quiet*. After about thirty minutes the path began sloping dramatically and the ceiling lowered with each descending stride.

After ten minutes or so, they were crawling through the narrow tunnel on their hands and knees. Harry struggled with his bag, which kept scraping against the ceiling and getting caught on jagged rocks. Draco seemed to be suffering the same problems as he did, even though the girls were moving along without struggle.

Twenty minutes of crawling around in the dirt was beginning to take its toll on Harry's limbs. The elbows of his long sleeved t-shirt had holes and the skin on his arms was rough from being dragged on the ground. He sighed gratefully when he realised that the ceiling was beginning to heighten a bit and after awhile, they were able to stand, though they still had to duck their heads for a good distance.

The tunnel opened suddenly into another great cavern. This was one very different from the first one they had encountered. It looked a lot more like the caves that Harry had seen in pictures and read descriptions about in various books. Great stalactites hung from the ceiling, some nearly touching the stalagmites. He heard dripping water as his eyes roamed over the different layers of rocks. He looked further down to his left and noticed a great underground lake.

"We have to cross the lake. Look," Draco pointed towards the shore. A small boat was perched there, along with two paddles.

"Do you think the boat is safe for the five of us?"

"There's only one way to find out."

Harry walked towards the front of the boat and tossed his bag in. The girls followed him, throwing their packs into the boat and waiting to board. He turned back to see if Draco was doing the same thing. He was a bit perturbed to see that Draco was in fact standing off to the side with his arms crossed, looking rather put out.

"What do you think you're doing?" Draco asked.

"Erm, putting my bag in the boat. You know, so that we could row across the lake."

"We? *We* will not be rowing, *you* will be rowing."

"We're going to both have to row. The girls can just sit in the middle of the boat."

Draco scowled at him before stalking over and climbing into the boat. Glaring at him, Harry moved to push the boat. The girls helped until it was mostly in the water. Harry stepped to the side and helped each of them in before pushing the boat out until it was completely off of the shore.

He stepped into the water and was surprised to find that it was pleasantly warm. He climbed into the boat, being careful not to tip it, and sat next to Draco. The other boy handed him a paddle, accompanied by a pointed glare and they set off.

After manoeuvring themselves around so that they could properly row, they quickly made their way to the other side of the lake without incident.

As everyone was climbing out the boat, Harry heard a shrill scream and immediately turned to look at the three girls. He saw that they were okay and began looking around, trying to discern the origin of the scream.

He heard several more screams, each louder and more shrill than the previous. After a moment, he had to cover his ears. He looked at Hermione, who was covering her ears as well. Akilah and Padma were staring straight ahead into what looked like a very dark tunnel.

Harry peered in the same direction and nearly screamed himself with he saw thousands of red, glowing eyes. Gaining some self control, he walked over to Hermione.

“What are those?!” he screamed loud enough for her to hear.

“Banshee Bats!” she replied, screaming as loud as he had.

“How do we get them to stop?” Draco yelled, coming over to conference with them.

“We can’t! They scream if they’re alarmed!” Hermione replied, her voice cracking ever so slightly. She shook her head, clearly agitated.

Akilah and Padma had joined them as well and stood with their hands clasped over their ears. Hermione looked at them and suddenly her face lit up. She turned to face Harry and without explanation, waved her hand at him.

Much to his relief, the ear piercing screams stopped. He pulled his hands away from his ears. Much to his dismay, he realised that he could hear nothing. It felt as if cotton had been stuck into his ears. The gentle sound of the lake was gone. Akilah, Padma and Draco were all wearing the same confused faces. He turned to Hermione for guidance.

She looked at him pointedly, as if waiting for him to cast the same spell. He looked at her, trying to figure out what exactly she had done.

By some creative movements of her hands and using the temporary blindness spell on him, Harry was able to figure out what she had done. Soon enough, they were all temporarily deaf and in great relief from the bats.

Shrugging, Draco moved forward, ducking his head as he walked through the bats. Harry watched as they started to swoop and dive at the blond haired boy. Draco took off at a run and the others had no choice but to follow him.

The group of bats was much larger than Harry had suspected and after five or so terrifying moments of battling them through the cave, the group emerged relatively unharmed except for a few scratches.

They were further down in the tunnel around a bend from the swarms of bats. Hermione removed the spells quickly.

The sounds of the cave rushed back into Harry's ears. He heard dripping water, the crunching of stones and the slight breeze of air that seemed to move throughout the deep, underground shafts.

He shook his head, clearing away the slight cottony feeling that remained. As he did so, he heard another new sound: scratching.

The scratching noise continued and Harry looked down at his feet. Hermione did the same. Suddenly, a small brown rat dashed out of a narrow hollow in the wall. It skidded around their feet and took off at a dead run in the direction they had just came from.

"Gross," said Akilah, who had noticed the rat as well.

Harry merely shrugged his shoulders. He looked up at Hermione and was immediately alarmed by the look on her face. "What's wrong?"

"I--that--it had a silver paw."

Harry's face immediately paled. It couldn't have had a silver paw. He didn't have time to comprehend what exactly that meant, because another sound was coming down the corridor.

Akilah heard it too. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Draco replied.

"The voices, they're coming closer."

Both Padma and Hermione got slightly panicked looks on their faces and moved closer together. Draco looked quickly around them.

"Over there, in the wall, there's a small hollow. Let's try and squeeze in there."

"I've got the cloak with me," Harry said as he dropped his bag to the ground.

"What cloak?" Akilah and Draco asked at the same time.

"My Invisibility Cloak."

"Your-well, of course, you have everything. That would explain the little incident in Hogsmeade third year," Draco said, once again glaring at Harry.

Harry had quickly grown sick of all the glaring and groaned audibly, motioning towards the hollow in the wall. "We need to hide. We can discuss later."

They all squished into the space, Harry pulling the cloak over them as best he could. He silently hoped they were completely covered, as a foot with no body attached might cause some commotion with whoever was coming their way.

He held his breath as a group of six or so figures dressed completely in black strolled past. A small gap issued from Hermione's mouth, audible only because she was standing right next to him. One of the figures had stopped suddenly and was staring straight at where the five students were standing.

"Avery, what is it?" came a gruff voice from under one of the hoods.

"I could have sworn that I heard something," came another voice, as a long, cloaked arm pointed in the general direction of the students' hiding spot.

"There's nothing there. Come on, we'll be late."

The group walked a little further passed them and stopped in front of a smooth stretch of wall. One of the figures whispered a password and a panel glided open. The group walked through and the wall slid shut behind them.

Akilah was the first to let out her breath and the others soon followed. Harry listened intently, making sure there were no more people coming, before tearing off the Invisibility Cloak. Everyone immediately turned to glare at Hermione, who sniffed and studiously ignored them.

"Well, it's just a matter of getting in there," she said, pointing towards the section of wall where the Death Eaters had gone in.

Draco stared at her. "Right, because it wouldn't be protected by about a thousand alarms and wards. As if we could just stroll in, undetected and scare the beejezus out of them? Earth to Hermione! They're Death Eaters."

Hermione's eyes flashed with anger as she looked at him. "And I'm sure you know all about that! Frankly, I wouldn't trust you as far as I could throw you Draco Malfoy! You may a half-magus and one of the top students in the school, but as far as I'm concerned, for all we know, you could very well be a spy!" she sputtered.

Harry, Akilah, Draco and Padma stared at the now red-faced Hermione. Harry, for one, was completely shocked by her outburst. Out of the Gryffindor students in IMS, Hermione had been the one who was most accepting of Draco, other than Akilah of course. She'd rarely said anything about him that was negative, even though Harry knew she couldn't stand him for very long periods of time.

"If that's how you feel, then fine! So be it! But we're all in this together, and whether you like it or not, the success of this entire thing depends on us, *all of us*, working together!" Draco replied, looking daggers at Hermione, who was standing with her hands on her hips.

A small beep issued from Harry's pocket. He pulled the button out of his pocket without taking his eyes off Draco and Hermione, who were still staring at each other. Much to his surprise, it was now red in colour. He placed a fingertip on the top of it and concentrated on communicating with the other teams.

"Potter?" came a tinny voice.

"This is Potter."

"This is Snape. Are you within bounds of the entryway?"

Harry turned to look at Draco and Hermione, who were now listening intently. They both nodded. "Yes, we are."

"You are to find a place to hide within range of the door. We will be entering the hideout by another entrance. You are our eyes and ears. Keep this active and listen for our signal. When it comes, break down the door and come in, wands ready."

"Alright."

There was a tiny click and the button stopped glowing as brightly. Harry gripped it tightly and turned to the group. "I guess we wait."

Hermione immediately sat down and opened her backpack. Rustling around a bit, she pulled out a few scraps of parchment and a heavy textbook.

"Granger! You brought homework?"

"This is due tomorrow," she said without looking up from the book.

Draco bent down and pulled the book away from her. "Hermione, we're in a life or death situation and you're worried about the homework due tomorrow. What does that say about your priorities?"

"That they are exactly as they should be. I've said it before and I'll say it again. I'd rather die than fail or be expelled," she said coolly, taking her book back from Draco.

Everyone except Harry gaped at her. He was busy listening intently to the small button, which was giving him a scene by scene broadcast of the events inside of the room where the Death Eaters had disappeared. It was pretty boring, he heard the Death Eaters discussing various cunning plans (Hermione had noticed and began scribbling notes, to which Draco rolled his eyes) and an occasional rustle or shifting from whoever was holding onto the other button.

"*Expelliarmus!*" came a loud voice from inside the room. It was audible both out in the corridor and over their communication device. Everyone in the tunnel jumped to their feet and backed up against the wall as Hermione and Draco pulled out their devices and activated them.

Loud screams and cries were punctuated by the casting of various spells. Harry waited and listened, anxious for the signal.

It never came as the entire fight was interrupted by someone shouting.

“There are more outside! There are more!”

Akilah and Hermione both gasped and Padma looked ready to cry out. Draco looked stonily at Harry.

“We need to do something, now.”

“Thank you, you’ve once again pointed out the oh so very obvious. Any plans, oh wise one?”

“Potter, where on earth did you pick up the sarcasm?”

“I’ve been spending far too much time with you.”

“Both of you! Shut up! We don’t have time to even come up with a plan, let alone listen to you bicker. Harry, take the cloak and get in there. Surprise them, whatever. We’ll follow and just fight them. It’s our only option,” Hermione said, sounding furious, scared and exasperated all at one time.

Harry and Draco looked at her, then at each other before nodding.

“I don’t need the cloak,” Harry said quietly.

“What do you mean? You can’t surprise them unless you’re invisible!” Draco pointed out.

“Not everyone needs a cloak to be invisible. You’ll need it more than I do.” He looked at Hermione one last time before closing his eyes. Gathering all of his concentration and power into one thought, he focused as intently as possible on invisibility. He pictured himself fading away into nothing and suddenly, he heard Hermione gasp.

Opening his eyes, he saw four shocked faces staring at the exact place he was standing.

“Hermione?”

“Harry! It worked!”

“Cover yourselves, hide! They’re coming!”

The others backed up into the narrow alcove and covered themselves. Harry moved against the wall where the door was. In a split second the panel had slid open and crowds of Death Eaters streamed into the narrow tunnel. Harry stood stalk-still as he watched faces that looked vaguely familiar run past him, some look right through him.

As soon as the group had moved farther down the hall, Harry slunk into the room where they had come from.

A battle was raging in the dimly lit room. In the few seconds he had to look around, Harry noticed that the room was sparsely decorated. The only furnishings appeared to be an ancient wooden table surrounded by ornately carved chairs.

Many of the chairs were now tipped over or smashed to pieces on the ground. He watched in horror as one of the figures clothed in the black cloak of the Death Eaters smash a chair over another figure cloaked in green. The person in green had his back turned to Harry and had his wand trained at a Death Eater.

Pulling his wand from his pocket, he trained it on the chair wielding Death Eater and sent the first curse that popped into his mind at the figure.

“Argh!” screamed the man, clasp ing his hands over his eyes. “I’m blind!”

The man who Harry now recognized as Professor Vector turned on his attacker and sent the stunning spell at him. The man fell to the ground and Vector stepped over him, running towards yet another group of Death Eaters.

Harry heard a slight commotion behind him and turned around.

Akilah, Padma, Draco and Hermione came tearing into the room, ripping off the Invisibility Cloak as they ran. Harry felt himself becoming visible again and nearly laughed at the shock that went over the room. The four students began shooting spells every which way, hitting Death Eaters as they moved.

Harry rushed to join them. He didn’t even have to say the spells as he waved his wand at their attackers. In the midst of the attack, he noticed that several of what he knew to be Dumbledore’s operatives were lying on the ground, obviously injured in some way.

The Death Eaters that had rushed out into the hallway earlier came running back in, wands out. Their advance crippled Harry’s group, the sheer numbers and force aiding in their fight.

It was obvious that Voldemort had done heavy recruiting since his rebirth. However, many of the wizards and witches were not fully prepared and as long as Harry’s group remained persistent, they managed to overtake many of them.

“Stupefy!” screamed one of the man trying to fight Harry.

He ducked the spell and shot a random charm at his attacker, hoping to at least temporarily disable him. It worked and Harry dodged another curse. He began to notice that the Death Eaters were no longer taking it easy and the use of the Unforgivable curses was becoming rampant.

He watched in horror as Padma was hit with the Cruciatus Curse and fell to the ground. Akilah noticed her friend and dropped her guard, running to Padma’s side. She too was hit with a curse that knocked her out.

Draco, Harry and Hermione were the only ones left standing and their victory seemed to be short lived as the Death Eaters became more vicious in their attacks. Thankfully, only about five were left standing, but Harry noticed that the operatives were either knocked down or nowhere to be found. The uneasiness once again invaded his consciousness, but he shook it away, concentrating on the task at hand.

Draco was engaged in a rather fierce battle with someone who was throwing curses like they were pebbles. Draco was practically doing back flips to avoid the hexes and spells, but he did get in a few good shots.

Hermione was also fighting and the last three seemed to be concentrating their efforts on Harry. He quickly disarmed two of them and managed to stun the third. After stunning the last two, he turned to help Draco was now on the offensive.

Shooting hex after hex at his opponent, he managed to push the man back until he was crouched on the floor. Draco held his wand pointed at the man's throat. "Stupefy!" he cried out. With a thud, his attacker hit the ground, landing on his face with a rather sickening crunch.

Harry moved to help Hermione who was slowly being backed into a wall. She blocked the curses and threw a few, but the Death Eater was faster than her. He was quickly overtaking her advances and Hermione looked on the verge of giving in to the inevitable.

Stepping in, he fired a *Phantomus* curse at her attacker. It was well placed and the man quickly fell.

Hermione and Harry stood facing each other. Tears were beginning to stream down Hermione's face and he moved to take her in his arms.

"Mione, what's wrong?"

"I couldn't do it, Harry. I couldn't take him. If you hadn't stepped in--"

"Don't say that. Hermione, you are the brightest witch I know. Look at all the others you hit. That guy was a foot taller than you and sounded like he was making up curses to throw at you."

She buried her head in his chest for a minute before leaning back to look him in the face.

Her eyes were shining with unshed tears and a thousand fears. He looked at her, certain that his every emotion was showing in his face. She tilted her head back. He leaned down...

"*Phantomus Avada Kedavra!*"

The spell hit her in the back. With a cry, she slipped from Harry's arms and fell to the ground. He watched in slow motion as her body hit the ground and a dark figure

stepped over her. Backing up and looking into the face of her attacker, Harry felt his stomach flop.

“Hello Harry.”

The voice of his attacker served as a slap in the face. Harry immediately snapped out of his surprise and sunk immediately into an anger so violent that he was positive that things would start to fly. Peter Pettigrew stood over Hermione, grinning widely at Harry, a malicious glint in his eye.

“Wormtail.”

“Fancy seeing you here. I don’t suppose Dumbledore would actually send students to fight, would he?”

Harry didn’t answer. He stared Wormtail in the face, not even trusting the man long enough to allow himself to blink. Wormtail raised his wand to Harry’s throat, as he was standing a mere four feet away.

Again, Harry felt himself acting in slow motion. He watched as Pettigrew flicked his wand. The spell hit him directly in the chest, and Harry shook with the violent pain coursing through his body. It nearly seized his mind, but amazingly, Harry deflected much of the pain.

He reeled backwards, stumbling as the effects of the curse ran through him. IT passed and he stood himself straight up, staring at Pettigrew again.

Pettigrew, for his part was shocked and his face showed it. Harry used the pause to his advantage and quickly shot a stunning spell at Wormtail. Not surprisingly, it was deflected. However, it gave Harry the advantage of having the first strike.

Pettigrew sent more jinxes at him, some of which seemed rather pointless (Harry had vaguely remembered the Tickling Charm from second year) and others which Harry was very glad to have escaped.

With speed that he didn’t know he had, Harry blocked the curses and fired off many of his own. A well aimed Phantomus spell caused Pettigrew to lose use of his right arm and this aided Harry greatly.

However, Pettigrew was a surprisingly skilled duellist and he hit Harry with some pretty painful spells. Harry was favouring his left leg heavily and a temporary blindness spell had left his vision pretty foggy.

A Jelly Legs Jinx sent Wormtail too his knees. Harry moved to him, holding his wand pointed directly at Wormtail’s forehead. Pettigrew looked at him with a serene expression that disturbed Harry a little bit.

“Your father would never have killed me.” The words fell as heavy as lead in the dead silent room. Harry lost all concern for his friends and his teachers. The mission and

school and Hermione flew out of his mind. The sole thought was Wormtail and the betrayal of his parents.

“My father never had the chance. He died knowing that you had betrayed him.” The line of his wand did not waver as the serene look on Wormtail’s face fell. A look of terror washed over his face as he heard Harry mouth the words, “*Phantomus Avada Kedavra!*”

The light green light hit Wormtail with a force that could have easily killed a man. However, he was still alive, this much Harry knew as he dashed to Hermione’s side. She was still lying on the ground, unconscious. He gathered her limp form to his chest.

“Mione. Please. Wake up,” he whispered into her hair, tears beginning to form in his eyes. He heard a shuffle behind him and turned. Draco stood next to him.

“We need to get them home,” he said quietly as he offered Harry a hand up. Harry nodded and took the proffered hand. Standing up, he brushed himself off, before leaning down to gather up Hermione. Draco walked back to Akilah and Padma. He conjured three stretchers and lifted Akilah and Padma onto them. He turned to take Hermione and Harry shook his head.

“I’d rather take her.”

“Alright. Well, I have no idea where the bloody portkey went, so I guess we’ll just have to apparate to the gates.”

“Are you sure it’s safe to apparate with them?”

“Normally, no. But I’m sure we can handle it.”

Harry nodded. Draco grasped onto the two stretchers and with a pop had disappeared. Harry followed immediately thereafter.

He looked up at Hogwarts. The imposing castle loomed ahead as they walked and Harry was eerily reminded of the night in third year when he had finally met Sirius. It was night time and the bright lights from the castle looked cold and distant, instead of welcoming as they usually appeared.

The trek to the castle was slow going, as Draco was managing the two stretchers carefully and Harry’s arms were too full to help. He occasionally glanced down at the still form in his arms. She looked as if she was sleeping and Harry allowed his mind to trail back to the nights that she had slept in his bed. Her small form, close against his, flooding him with warmth and comfort. He sighed and leaned his head down to kiss her awkwardly on the head.

They reached the castle doors and struggled to get through them, finally getting inside and making their way up to the Hospital Wing.

The castle was eerily silent as they walked upstairs, but Harry paid no attention. His only concern was making sure Hermione was safe.

Madam Pomfrey merely nodded at the boys as they walked in and immediately set about checking on the girls. As soon as he had set Hermione down on one of the beds, Harry sank into a chair. The exhaustion finally got the better of him. It was nearly midnight and his mind struggled to stay awake.

His head snapped up as the door to the infirmary burst open. A figure with black robes strode purposefully into the room and walked right up to Harry, who was now standing, wide awake.

“Potter,” said a strange voice. A hand reached up and pulled the hood back.

Fury consumed him. Nothing could have prevented him from performing what would perhaps be the most uncharacteristic action in his life. Without so much as a scruple, Harry Potter pulled his arm back and swung his fist into the face of one Peter Pettigrew.

Pettigrew reeled and fell back, tripping and falling across one of the hospital beds.

Draco stared at Harry, who was now pointing his wand at the still man.

Madam Pomfrey looked panic stricken at the scene in her hospital wing.

“God *dammit* Harry!”

With a look of fierce anger, Arabella pulled herself off of the bed. “I come up here to tell you that you’ll be receiving full marks on the OWLs and what do I get? Throttled. Bloody fantastic. What are you going to do? Put the full body bind on me?” she said, turning to face Draco.

“Erm, Arabella, you have a little something right there,” he motioned towards the side of his chin.

Arabella reached a hand up and wiped away the blood at the corner of her mouth. “What in the bloody hell was that for, Harry?”

“What do you mean? I got full marks on the OWLs? What OWLs? And why are you disguised as Pettigrew?” he spat back at her, still seething.

“It was a test! I’m dressed as Pettigrew so that I could test your duelling skills.”

Harry looked at her as if she’d just said that Snape would be performing karaoke in the Great Hall dressed as a ballerina. His face quickly dissolved into anger again as he clenched his fists at his side. “A test?! That was a bloody test?! Are you mad? We could have been killed! Look at Hermione and the rest! They’ve been hurt! Badly. This is a sick sort of test.”

“Well, what did you expect? That we’d do give you written essays on the benefits of the tickling charm? Or that we’d play Duelling Charades? Where two people act out a duel and you try and figure out what ruddy spells they’re using? Honestly, Harry, use your *brain*, Merlin knows you’ve got one.”

Harry shook with anger, but he kept his mouth clamped shut. Arabella left them with instructions to rest up and be prepared for the presentations the next day. She fixed Harry with another dirty look before walking back out of the hospital wing.

Harry collapsed on his bed, the events of the previous day echoing in his mind. He was exhausted in every way imaginable. He had spent the entire night sitting by Hermione in the hospital wing. When she had awoken, Madam Pomfrey allowed him to take her back to the door and once she was safely tucked in his bed, he went to take a shower.

He walked from the bathroom, running a hand haphazardly through his damp hair. He sighed and pulled back the duvet cover on his bed. Hermione was curled up on the other side, fast asleep. He leaned over and kissed her softly on the forehead before going back to his side of the bed. As his head hit the soft, downy pillows, he closed his tired eyes, welcoming reprieve from the exhaustion that was racking his body. He sighed audibly as the tense muscles in his back began to stretch themselves out, the tingling sensations of the relaxing muscles echoed throughout his body as he felt his consciousness slipping away into the recesses of his mind.

"Harry! Wake up! You have to get dressed!" Hermione was leaning over him, shaking him gently.

He opened his eyes reluctantly, peering at the Muggle clock next to his bed. It was already nine o'clock. He'd missed breakfast. Struggling to pull himself up, Harry looked around the room. His eyesight hadn't fully recovered yet and everything looked a bit hazy. He stretched lazily and fell back on the bed.

"Harry, no. You have to give your presentation with Draco today. Wake up," she shook him again softly and he groaned at the mention of the presentation. Of course, he'd completely forgotten. Grudgingly, Harry got out of his bed and walked to the bathroom. He showered and changed into a set of school robes. After attempting, and failing to do something with his hair, he walked out to the lounge, where Hermione was reclined on one of the sofas.

"Morning. I made you toast."

"Thanks. Are you giving your presentation today?"

"Sometimes I wonder if you pay any attention. Only you and Draco are presenting today. And besides that, you're presenting in the Great Hall."

"I knew that."

"Are you nervous?"

"Not really. Draco has the thing scripted, what could go wrong?"

Hermione shrugged. She brightened suddenly. “Harry, could I borrow the Marauder’s Map today? I want to see if Ami and my parents come to the presentation.”

“Sure, but I didn’t know it showed them.”

“Of course it does. It shows everyone at Hogwarts.”

“Potter, the most important thing to remember is this: Don’t screw up.”

“Shut up, Malfoy.”

The two boys sat in the front row of the Great Hall, which had been divided in half and turned into a lecture hall for the week’s worth of presentations by IMS students. Most of the students were in attendance, as the teachers had offered extra credit. Dumbledore stood on the small stage and looked out over the audience.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I’d like to get started quickly, so, without further ado, Mr. Harry Potter and Mr. Draco Malfoy.”

Both boys stood and made their way to the stage. Draco walked directly to the podium while Harry moved to stand slightly off to the side.

The presentation had definitely been designed by Draco. The sole purpose of it seemed to be putting Harry through his paces. Draco spent nearly forty five minutes placing Harry under various spells.

At one point, near the end, Harry was standing and waiting for the final demonstration. Draco had constructed an elaborate scheme that allowed for their audience to actually view a dream. The main idea was that Draco would be put Harry under a sleeping charm, and then cast an incantation that would allow him to enter Harry’s dream. They had found that Draco would be able to somewhat control the dream just by being there. However, for it to work properly, Draco had to be placed into a sleep charm as well.

“We had originally planned for Headmaster Dumbledore to cast the sleep charm, but as a special treat, Minister Connolly, who is here today to view the presentation, has agreed to do it,” Draco said, putting on a fake smile as he talked into the microphone.

Harry was truly surprised. He hadn’t even noticed the Minister of Magic. He watched as Connolly ascended the stairs onto the stage, giving Harry a brief nod and smile. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry caught Hermione’s gaze. She was holding the Marauder’s Map open in her lap and had a panicked look on her face. She was gesturing wildly, while attempting not to attract too much attention. She saw him and leaned her head towards the direction of the podium. Harry looked and saw Minister Connolly looking right at him, with a very peculiar look on his face.

Suddenly, the Minister had raised his wand at Harry. He quickly said an incantation, but it was barely audible.

“Harry! Watch out!” Hermione screamed, making a dash for the stage.

The spell hit him and Harry fell to the ground.

Chapter Fifteen- The Veneficus Quies

"This is not real," he said aloud. Every ounce of him wanted to believe it.

His every sense denied that truth that he longed to prove. He saw the cool blue sky as it collided with the green earth in the distance. He could smell the scents carried on the soft, almost summery breeze as it ruffled his hair, ever so slightly. That very breeze created a rustling in the grasses of this strange place and he had to strain to hear it. Yet it was reassuring, because the soothing sounds and scents and feelings reminded him that he not completely lost touch with reality.

He was in Terre de la Magie, of that there was no doubt. The magic thrived in every tree, every blade of grass. As he took in this place, he could not help but feel at ease. There was no place else that he felt like this. And as Harry Potter walked, he knew that this is how it always has been and how it always should be.

"It is time Harry."

"I know."

He turned and faced Tristram, who was wearing a look of grim sadness.

"Tristram, why are you here?" he asked as the pair began walking, having fallen easily in stride with one another.

"Because I was given an offer that I could not refuse."

They continued in silence for some time.

"What was it?"

"The chance to be free and live."

"But if you are sided with Voldemort, how are you free?"

"I could not give Voldemort the Key for which he sought because I did not possess it. In return for my life, I offered to give him another key. Knowledge. I have, in the past year, given him more knowledge than he could ever hope to learn through a book."

"What did you mean by free?"

"Do you not feel it Harry? The magic here. Surely you must feel the connection. This is our world and we belong here."

"Our world?"

"Magi."

"But--I--I--thought..."

"You are the only magus of your time."

"Then how are you here?"

"I've been brought here. I exist only in your mind, Harry. Voldemort came to my time and learned a great deal from me."

"How did he do that?"

"I do not know. But in my time, I was a Magus, as were many, many others. It is a shame that such power has dissipated throughout the years."

"Is Voldemort a Magus?"

"He is half. That is why he needs me. To teach him and to allow him entrance into your mind."

Harry considered this briefly before his thoughts jumped to a previous question.

"Why do you call him master?"

"One day you will learn that it is sometimes best to travel with the ebb and flow of the water than it is to fight against the current."

Harry shook his head, unable to understand this man's ability to compromise what he held so dearly: his freedom.

"He does not control my mind Harry," said Tristram, answering an unasked question. "Now you will go to him. I can do nothing to help you any longer. Harry, guard it with your life," he said, placing a hand lightly on Harry's shoulder.

"Guard what?"

Tristram, however, was gone and Harry reached a hand up to touch his shoulder. He felt alone now and very apprehensive about whatever was coming. He didn't have long to worry, however, as his safe haven was slowly fading into a much harsher reality. The green faded into brown and the blue warped into a stormy grey. The magic was washed away and replaced with something that Harry had struggled to push out of his mind. Everywhere, in everything, there was the undeniable, the inescapable feeling of death.

This place had haunted his dreams and memories for nearly a year. He had never expected to be back here, yet he was not surprised that he was. The graveyard had not changed in the slightest. The old gravestones looked frozen in time, the granite stones weathered and worn. They were near the gravesite from Harry's fourth year and he saw that the stone had not been replaced. It was as if time was frozen. Even the trees looked the same. Harry noticed the Death Eaters gathered around as well. They all stood, gathered in a circle and waiting expectantly, for what, he did not know.

As was the usual, Voldemort stood in the centre of them. On his right hand side, was a tall wizard completely hidden by a black cloak. On his left was the real Peter Pettigrew. The other Death Eaters gathered around were all wearing the traditional black, but strangely enough, their faces were not covered. As Harry looked closely at each one of them, he saw that they did not move or blink or even look as if they were breathing. He shook his head and looked again. Not one of the Death Eaters in the surrounding circle *moved*.

“Welcome Harry.”

He turned to Voldemort at the mention of his name, forgetting about the mystery of the statuesque Death Eaters.

“What did you do to them?” he motioned towards the figures.

“Harry, I would like you to meet someone,” Voldemort pointed to the figure at his right, blatantly disregarding Harry’s question.

The man walked to Harry, pulling back his hood as he drew closer. The skin on his face was oddly pale and was in stark contrast to his dark, dark hair and the black cloak. His blue eyes stood out sharply. Of course, it was Bernard Connolly.

“Hello Harry,” he said, his voice unchanged from that of the man he had met on the Quidditch pitch.

Harry nodded at the man, and was surprised at himself for not realising sooner that Connolly was a Death Eater. Yet for some reason, the idea that Connolly was in fact, well, *Connolly* did not sit well with him.

“Tell me, Harry, did you ever find out what happens to a man when his soul is taken by a Dementor?” Voldemort looked at him, watching as Harry turned his gaze between Voldemort and Connolly.

“No. It isn’t really documented,” he replied, focusing once again on Connolly.

“When the Dementor’s Kiss is administered the soul of the person takes form into something else. Without a body and mind to keep it unchanged, the soul transforms into a Dementor.”

Harry listened intently as Voldemort wore on.

“As I’m sure you found out, the body of the one who has lost their soul dies within three days. The only way to save that body is to retrieve the soul. However, once the soul leaves the body, it can be near impossible to get it back in the body.” Voldemort had moved closer to Harry and Connolly. He was now looking at Connolly as Harry had once seen a mad scientist look at his creation in some old film that Vernon had been watching. He seemed strangely proud and protective.

Again Harry gave no answer. His heart was pounding in anticipation. Something very, very strange was going on and he was a bit fazed by Voldemort’s lack of maliciousness.

“I’m surprised at you Harry. We have given you a number of hints this year; I’m really very surprised that your little Mudblood girlfriend didn’t figure it all out sooner.”

“Don’t call her that,” Harry said, emotions flooding his voice. *Hermione*. He closed his eyes, what had she been trying to tell him? He sighed inwardly, trying to erase her face from his memory. She was too distracting. Part of him clung to that image, however, she was his support and he knew that he needed her.

Voldemort gave him a weird, twisted grin as Connolly stepped back from Harry. Voldemort turned to Connolly, wand out, and began chanting a strange spell. It was not Latin or English, or any language that Harry recognized. Yet he had the strange feeling that he had gotten when Hermione had read her Prophecy. The odd tingling in his spine, the tidal wave of some inborn familiarity coursing through his veins. *He knew this*.

In the instant that Connolly’s face began changing; Harry’s mind began speeding ahead. It gained momentum as the pieces clicked into place. Tristram, the Magi, the Dementor’s Kiss, the Marauder’s Map, Bernard Connolly, *Bernard Connolly*, the Map, Dementors, *Bernard Connolly*, B C...

And there he was. The straw blond hair, cornflower blue eyes, and the sickeningly pale complexion. Yet it was not so pale anymore. A faint pink tinge was now evident in his skin. He was alive.

“Harry, I believe you are familiar with my most faithful servant, Bartemis Crouch.”

Harry gasped as Voldemort said the name. Parts of the puzzle made sense. But how had it worked? This man had received the Kiss. He was dead. He had to be. It defied all logic, all basic knowledge that Harry knew. Yet, here he stood, staring directly at Harry, a fiery look of anger on his face, no doubt fuelled by revenge.

“Harry, as a Magus, there are many things that you must learn about yourself. As a half-Magus, there is only so much I can do, but with the help of Tristram I was able to master some very basic, ancient magic. These are dream spells that you only read about, if at all. Spells such as the retrieval of my servant’s soul, the disguise of Bernard Connolly, all of them are Old Magic.”

He was dreaming. That had to be it. It couldn't be true. Voldemort knowing ancient magic that no one had ever used or barely even remembered. The rebirth of his most faithful servant. Taking an ancient Magus and putting him in this time. It was too unreal. There was no way.

He took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. How was it possible? It couldn't be. He was tired and it was a dream. The odd Death Eaters attested to that.

“Harry, it is time.”

Again those words. *Time for what?* he wondered. He hadn't thought to ask Tristram when he'd had the chance and he instantly regretted it as Voldemort turned slightly and looked directly at two of the 'statues' grouped around them. With a wave of his wand, the two unfroze and walked towards him.

Harry's stomach flopped. Lucius and Draco Malfoy were now walking towards him, their strides identical and filled with evil purpose. Harry swallowed nervously. Hermione had been right in her suspicions of Draco. He was, by all accounts, somehow tied to Voldemort. Yet Harry had doubted it. Why would Dumbledore let such a student into the program? It seemed that spy in their midst was the most dangerous thing that could happen.

He now regretted most of the last seven or eight months. He had learned to ignore Draco and even realised that he come to not mind working with the insufferable boy. He had been a good student with an eye for details. Thinking back, Harry remembered little instances where it should have been obvious. When Hermione had found the book, Draco had recognized it. In the cave, Draco had been the one leading their expedition and helping with the Death Eaters. They weren't real, but if Harry knew Arabella, she would have made that whole scenario as realistic as possible. *He should have known.*

They reached him and stood on either side of him, one grasping either arm. Draco would not meet his eye and Lucius seemed bent on making this as painful as possible for Harry. He barely felt Draco's grasp, but he Lucius was grasping him hard enough to bruise. *This is not real.* It was quickly becoming his mantra.

Voldemort and Crouch approached Harry. He faced them, not meeting either of their piercing stares. He waited as Voldemort stretched out a thin, long finger. The searing pain came instantly. He cried out as the heat hit his brain. He felt the consciousness slipping. The world spun in a dizzying array of colour and pain.

When he awoke, he found himself tied to something. Voldemort, Crouch and Pettigrew were standing directly in front of him, awaiting his awakening. The Malfoys were off to the side, watching and waiting intently.

“Harry, Wormtail tells me that you've become quite adept at certain Magus powers. He claims that you can become invisible now without any sort of magical device. Is

this true?" Voldemort questioned him immediately upon realising that Harry was awake.

It had been Wormtail in the cave. Harry had assumed it had been Arabella, but how had she become a rat with a silver paw? It wasn't possible. He shook his head again.

"It's not true?"

"No, it is."

"Excellent. That means that the Magus powers have fully manifested themselves. Wormtail, bring me the book." Voldemort extended a hand towards Wormtail, beckoning him to move forward.

From the folds of his robes, Wormtail withdrew a small, black book. It looked oddly familiar to Harry. He narrowed his eyes, trying to make out what was written on the front.

"The Veneficus Quies is the second Key to the Ultimate Powers. Created by Hufflepuff before the Founding, it can be used as a means of mind control. The charm must be placed on one who is under the Soporio Charm. From what I have gathered from my research and from the documents I have found in my family's vault, it can be used on multiple people in one try. It has been well hidden. Approximately a thousand years from the Founding, a full Magus will come to power. It is within this Magus that the Veneficus Quies can be found," Voldemort read aloud from the small journal. "Slytherin goes on to explain, Harry, the means to which the spell can be removed from this great being."

"How can you read that? It's written in Mage," Harry spoke without meaning to. His mind stumbled over itself as his voice caught in his throat. How had he known the language?

"Tristram."

Harry nodded. The information was pounding into his brain at too fast a rate and in his dream state, he was having trouble processing it.

"Harry, we want the charm," Voldemort said, the unnatural kindness that he been in his voice before had completely disappeared.

"I don't have it. I don't even understand what you're talking about," he admitted.

"Oh, but you do have it. I know that you spent a good portion of this year learning about various charms. I even know that you visited the little Mudblood's mental retreat through a charm your teacher placed on her. She stored that charm inside your girlfriend using the Texius charm. She extracted it the same way. Texius works much the same as Fidelius, Harry. Which, I am sure you are quite familiar with, no?"

He didn't answer Voldemort for he was too busy trying to slow his racing heart. The charm, this *Veneficus Quies*, was inside him and Voldemort wanted it. He now understood what Tristram had meant. But how could he guard it?

Harry noticed that the other Death Eaters had stepped back. Voldemort now stood directly in front of him with his wand raised. He would not look the wizard in the eyes and forced his glance elsewhere. Draco was staring right at him, though his expression was unreadable.

The words that began spilling from Voldemort's mouth were in the same language that Hermione's prophecy was written in. He noticed however, that the Dark wizard did not have the same grasp of the ancient tongue that Hermione did. He paused occasionally, often struggling with a word or phrase. However different the speech patterns, the words had the same effect on Harry, though it was magnified a thousand fold. Harry sighed inwardly as the words washed over him. The words called out to him, to his blood, and it responded. He felt every fibre of his being stretching and moving with the almost musical words. The language was beautiful, almost romantic in style, yet different. It was very melodious, the words coming in different timbres and pitches that showed the emotions intertwined. It was obviously a magical language, for Harry heard it not only with his ears, but with his whole self.

There was an ancient knowledge to it. Something foreign, yet familiar. He strained to hear every last word, as if his existence depended solely on this speech. The words that Voldemort felt as some sort of call, a call of the wild. His heritage, his being, his existence.

The words began to strengthen in resolve. He felt his mind bend as the words wrapped around the strange syllables beginning to form in his own thoughts.

He saw the words, scripted out. Even the written words were beautiful, with the strange characters and ancient, curving symbols. It flowed easily and Harry thought it could almost be artwork, something that could be framed and displayed.

He had no control over his own actions any longer. He tried to fight it, tried to resist the urge to spill forth the knowledge of the ages, the secret within his soul.

Gathering his strength, both mentally and magically, Harry battled to keep his knowledge hidden. He succeeded for some time, but the spell that Voldemort was using was far stronger. It was meant to extract the charm from his mind, to pluck it from his knowledge and place it into the waiting hands of a far more sinister being.

Instinctively, Harry knew that the only means of protection of this information was death, for if he was dead, it could not be drawn from him. There was no possible way to do it. That must be why they had tied him up. He longed to end the struggle in his mind, for he was becoming exhausted with the battle. Every ounce of strength channelled into the fight; he pulled from every reserve yet he slowly began to realise that it was useless.

He gathered his strength for one final fight. He had little strength left and his mind began to wander. Without guidance it wandered to Hermione. Her face appeared in

his mind, a scene playing out between them. It was his first year, of what was undoubtedly his favourite memory of Hermione. She had hugged him, his first real hug, and told him that he could retrieve the stone and win against Voldemort, because he was a great wizard. His power didn't come from his blood or the magic inside of his soul, it came from the person he was. His friends, really his family, made him the wizard he was. And so he focused on Hermione, drawing from her great reserves of strength, power and ability. He would fight for her.

He held out a little longer, resisting everything in him. His mind ached as did his entire body. He was now engulfed in violent tremors, magic seeping out of every pore. The world around him was warped, the graveyard in Harry's memory crumbling under the violence being caused by Harry's resistance.

He was sweating, crying out and holding on for dear life.

He felt his grip slip, his hold over his own knowledge finally weakening under Voldemort's charm.

With one final tug from the merciless spell being cast by Voldemort, the charm poured from Harry's mouth.

He felt his tongue move gracefully over each syllable of the spell being drawn out of him. He vaguely realised that Crouch was concurrently casting a spell, trapping the words from Harry so that they could be used later. He tried to close his mouth, stop his words, but it would not happen. He could do nothing to stop the flow of the words.

In three verses they came, each stronger than the previous. They lengthened and stretched. The words were a powerful concoction and as Harry spoke he realised that he knew the meanings. As the final syllables of the third verse tumbled from Harry's conscious, he felt as if a great burden had been lifted.

Exhausted from the effort of the struggle, Harry's body fell limply against the structure he was tied to. A sweat had broken out on his brow and he sighed audibly, his mind shutting down and his body struggling to keep itself upright and failing miserably.

The graveyard was in ruins. The entire scene was depicted from Harry's memories and it was obvious by the state of their surroundings that Harry was in a terrible mental state.

"Take him down," Voldemort instructed. The Malfoys moved for him.

"Stop!" A great voice rang out through the destroyed graveyard. Everyone froze. They all waited for something to happen, but there was only great silence. The wind rustled in the trees and the cloaks of the various wizards flapped lightly in the cool spring breeze. There were no other sounds in the now eerily silent cemetery.

Without warning, a great flash of light shot through the still standing figures of the Death Eaters. When it faded, Pettigrew was lying in a heap on the group.

The flash was a catalyst for the group. Lucius immediately turned to Harry and cast the full body bind on him, though it was largely unnecessary as Harry wasn't even completely conscious, let alone moving. Voldemort moved slowly towards where the circle of Death Eaters was. Crouch stood his ground, wand out and keeping an eye on Harry. Draco was slinking slowly backwards, trying to keep himself out of the fray.

Harry watched through a haze as Lucius began firing various curses in the direction that the light had come from. Harry heard a soft pop followed by a few muttered words and he felt the full bind lifted from his body. An Invisible hand was loosening the ropes and another charm had them severed. Harry's limbs were not strong enough to hold him however, and he crumpled to the ground. He heard a gasp and a slight rustling. A hand touched his arm, and the warmth and emotion communicated by that slight touch resolved Harry. He felt his strength slowly returning.

Whoever it was walked quietly passed him and with another charm, Crouch fell, stiff as a board, to the ground. Both Lucius and Voldemort turned towards where Harry was now lying.

"Show yourself!" Lucius shouted.

Another light flashed; another shouted curse from behind him and Lucius fell to the ground, much the same as Wormtail had. He recognized the voice and stiffened.

Harry heard more faint movements and watched in horror as the Invisibility Cloak was pulled back from the wearer, having caught on something on the ground. The bearer continued, taking a moment to notice that she was now in full view of everyone.

Hermione stopped and stood in the very centre of the cemetery, wand pointed directly at Voldemort.

The evil, high pitched cackle that echoed in the silent graveyard chilled Harry to the bone. At the same moment that Hermione was revealed and Voldemort began laughing, Harry felt a soft tingling in his body. His strength had trickled back and he found that he could now pull himself up.

Voldemort had stopped laughing and was pointing his wand at Hermione, his back to Harry.

"You stupid little Mudblood. Did you think you could save your friend?"

Hermione did not answer and stared at Voldemort, her face nondescript. Harry did not have to look hard to see the raw in her eyes.

"Dumbledore is an old fool if he thinks the fate of the wizarding world rests in the hands of a few teenagers. Then again, I suppose it does make my life easier."

Again no answer.

"Answer me!"

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” she replied softly.

“*Crucio!*”

The curse hit Hermione full on and she cried out. He saw her limbs tremble and she began to sweat, yet amazingly, she remained standing. He too stood now, facing Voldemort’s back. Shakily, he moved forward and saw Hermione’s eyes grow wide as he slowly raised his hand.

Voldemort removed the curse from Hermione and grinned, his eyes flashing. He poised his wand again.

“Avada-“

The words that Harry shouted are forever lost, for they were in Mage and he cannot bring himself to remember exactly what they were. As Voldemort began the last word of his Killing Curse, Harry shouted a spell loud enough to knock Voldemort off his feet and face down onto the earth.

He fell, his strength once more completely drained. Hermione stared opened mouth at the collapsed wizard and stalled a moment before rushing to Harry.

She pulled him to her as she dropped to her knees next to him.

“Harry, Harry are you alright?” she cried, slightly hysterical.

He nodded as she began to cry, clutching her tightly.

“I was so scared when you fell on the stage, the map-it showed who he was. Harry, I’m so-“

He silenced her with a kiss, clasping his lips over hers. She yielded to his advances, allowing his tongue to wander into her mouth. And she kissed back. A passion that Harry did not realise was there shown through every kiss. He felt himself melting into her as her warm tears moistened his face. He tasted her. The sweetness of her kisses and the saltiness of her tears mingled in his mouth and he felt himself wanting to cry right with her.

She pulled back, her face shining. She embraced him tightly once more. “Thank god you’re okay.”

He closed his eyes as he hugged her back, wanting to stay forever in this moment.

"Hermione?"

She looked at him, her brown eyes smiled at him through the tears.

"I--" With a start, he saw Voldemort standing up. His evil eyes glowed a furious red and his wand was trained on the pair.

Harry had no time to reach for a wand or even raise his hand. He shoved Hermione out of the way and cried out as a deep pain hit his chest. The Cruciatus curse washed over him and he screamed, the pain tripling because of his lack of strength. Through the fog of terror, he saw another figure dart to him and Hermione. There was a flash of purple and the pain from Voldemort's curse stopped instantly. The scene in the graveyard began fading and spinning and his vision was engulfed in pure, white light.

Chapter Sixteen- Closure

**"The end is never as satisfying as the journey. To have achieved everything but to have done so without integrity and excitement is to have achieved nothing."-
Unknown**

Harry got shakily to his feet. He had not awakened in a bed in the hospital wing or even in his own bed. Looking around he found himself in a clearing and was disoriented by the vast number of trees that surrounded it. His eyes went to the ground and he saw Hermione curled up, not far from where he had been. He sunk to his knees and gathered her limp form into his arms, holding her across his knees.

"Mione? Mione, wake up," he whispered, touching her face and her hands, looking for any movement. "Hermione. Please. Wake up," he said a little louder. Beginning to panic, he shook her gently. No response came.

"Hermione! Wake up!" he shook her again.

Suddenly, her eyelids began to flutter and slowly open. She gazed up at him, taking a moment to register his face.

"Harry?"

At the sound of her voice, his heart cried out and he realised that he had begun to cry.

"Oh, Hermione, thank god." He pulled her closer and hugged her. After a moment she curled tighter against him, grasping his hand.

"I thought I'd lost you," he whispered into her hair.

She shook her head against his chest before pulling back to meet his eyes.

"Where are we?"

"I-I'm not sure. This place doesn't seem familiar."

"Are we still in your dreams?"

"I don't know," he replied, shaking his head.

She took a deep breath and tried to pull herself up. She couldn't gather the strength and resigned herself to sitting on the hard forest floor. "Do you suppose we could apparate home?"

"We could try. Or at least try apparating to Hogsmeade."

She nodded and he stood up, offering her a hand. She grasped it and allowed him to pull her up. Her balance wavered and she grabbed at his arm for support. He moved closer to her and in a wave of emotion, pulled her into a tight embrace. He felt her sigh against him, wrapping her own arms around his waist. He kissed the top of her head.

"I thought I'd lost you."

She didn't respond, her only action being to squeeze him tighter. After a few moments, she pulled back and looked up at him. They looked at each other for a few moments. Harry felt himself falling, falling into her eyes and the uninhibited emotion they held. "We ought to..." she trailed off, a glaze coming over her coffee coloured eyes and took a deep breath. She tilted her chin up, bringing their lips within just a few inches of each other. His pulse began to race and he ached with longing, doubled because of her slow movements.

When their lips collided, Harry felt every agonizing moment of the last six months fuelling their kisses. He was so absorbed in kissing her, touching her, and being with her, yet he couldn't escape the one thought that kept plaguing him.

He had almost lost her.

She had rescued him, saved his life. She had fought for him. And she had almost died. Because of him. He pulled away from her and looked into those brown orbs. His favourite thing about her eyes had also been that every emotion was found in those eyes. Her face was usually unreadable, but her eyes were another story.

The mixture of fear, happiness, confusion and even a little bit of lust brought Harry down from his high. "Hermione..."

"Don't say it Harry. I wanted to come. I had to."

He kissed her again, more tenderly this time. The passion was still there, lying underneath a calm and comfort that Harry had never felt when he'd kissed Ginny. He knew right then that kissing Hermione would never be like kissing anyone else.

Hermione invaded every sense. She was beautiful and glowed with a radiance that did not come from her external beauty. Of course, she was beautiful on the outside, but not in a Grecian goddess sort of way. She was beautiful because of what Harry knew was on the inside. A sense of humour peppered with a slight sarcasm, an intelligence unmatched by few he had ever known, if any at all, and a power so great, yet so tempered, that he knew she was a force to be reckoned with. She exuded a quiet confidence, while at the same time, stayed grounded because of her insecurities.

The small gasps, sighs and moans that she emitted stimulated his feelings for her. Every little sound made Harry want for nothing more than to just kiss her and hold her. She smelled so good. It was milk, honey and fresh flowers. It was a clean smell, not too overpowering or fruity or fake. It was natural and fresh and it was in her hair and on her face and every part of her.

The skin on her face and hands was the softest Harry had ever known. Though his experiences were limited, he knew there was something special about her. Her touch caused a spark, no, a *tingle* that made the rest of the world drop into oblivion. It had the power to calm him or drive him.

The taste of Hermione was what truly enveloped Harry. It was sweet and gentle and lingered on his lips after they'd pulled apart. The memories of her kisses, of the soft, gentle lips and the caressing of her mouth was wrapped up in that single taste that left him wanting more.

She was the world, *his* world.

And he was terrified.

It was about the time that Harry realised that he'd never been so scared, not even standing face to face with Voldemort himself, that he also noticed a saltiness mixed in with the usual sweetness of Hermione's kisses. Again he pulled back.

"Why are you crying?"

And so she was, in great, silent tears that slid slowly down her cheeks, having leaked from the corners of her eyes. She made no attempt to wipe them away, merely looked at him with her eyes shining and her lips slightly swollen as her hands trembled.

"I'm so scared."

Nothing could have kept him from pulling her into a large embrace. She immediately curled into his arms, putting her head against his chest and sobbing into his shirt. He rested his chin on her head, hushing her and rocking her back and forth softly.

"What are you scared of?"

"Nothing. Everything. You, us, what just happened in the graveyard, where we are..." she murmured, looking as if she was ticking things off in her mind.

"What about us?"

"I don't know. I've been fighting everything I think I feel since November. I don't know what I want Harry. And you kissing me like that doesn't help."

His laugh was hollow. "How do you feel?"

"About you or about all this?" she whispered, waving her hand out, gesturing at the overwhelming situation that had presented itself to them.

"Me. This. Both. What is this?"

"This is us."

"Is there an us, Hermione?"

"I don't know." She shook her head again and stepped back from him, drawing a deep breath. "We need to get home."

He looked at her, worry sketched on his features. "Do you still want to try Apparating?"

"It's our best bet really. I'll try for Hogsmeade, just in case."

He nodded and waited for her to Apparate. She knit her brows in concentration and he could tell almost immediately that something was wrong. It was like watching Apparition in slow motion. Hermione looked like some sort of strange image. She wavered and blinked out. Within the blink of an eye, she had returned to normal, with the exception that her face now bore a horrified look.

Harry's mouth dropped in shock at the strange occurrence. "What happened?"

"I-I have no idea," she stuttered. She looked perplexed as she stared at the ground.

Suddenly, her head snapped up. "Harry, you apparate to Hogsmeade."

"But-I can't! It doesn't work, you just tried it!"

"Trust me, try it. Wait, give me your hand."

He took her hand, and concentrated on Apparating to Hogsmeade.

He opened his eyes and was shocked to find himself standing in front of the Three Broomsticks. Hermione was standing next to him, her eyes bright.

"We're still in your dreams."

"Then where were we before? I've never been in a forest like that in my life!"

"I'm not sure. And it's the last of our worries right now. We need to figure out how to get out of here."

"You mean you don't know?"

"Well, the spell that Ginny cast on me wears off when the person whose dream I'm in wakes up. But I don't know what spell Connolly cast on you, so I'm not even sure if you wake up."

"What do you mean if?"

"Well, he could have put a variety of different spells on you. I'm hoping it's just a simple sleep charm that will wear off soon."

The terrified screams and shouts from the amassed audience wrenched him from the deep sleep. He heard lots of footsteps and various thumping noises as he slowly pulled himself into a sitting position.

A quick look around brought into focus a great many sights. Draco was lying closest to him, still out cold and bleeding from a severe cut on his temple. Barty Crouch, still completely disguised as Bernard Connolly was slumped against the podium, though Harry had no idea what was holding him up. Dumbledore was standing at the edge of the stage, holding his wand and attempting to calm the audience without raising his voice. Hermione was in the main aisle, sprawled on the floor, looking as if she too was just awakening. Ginny was standing over her, holding a wand over the collapsed girl. Ron was sitting in his seat, watching the chaos. He was the first to notice Harry. "Harry!" he called out, jumping to his feet.

Others heard him shout and stopped to look at Ron, who was clambering over others in an attempt to reach the stage. Dumbledore noticed Harry as well and attempted to silence the people in the room. His attempts were unsuccessful and Harry caught a glimpse of the wizard that he knew Voldemort considered to be his single threat.

"Silence!" Dumbledore shouted, reminding Harry of the pandemonium that ensued when Professor Quirrell announced the troll attack in first year. The entire room froze, with the exception of those still unconscious, and stared at him.

"Harry, what happened? Connolly hit you—" Ron started, stopping when Dumbledore placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I think Mr. Weasley, that this conversation would best be continued in private."

Dumbledore summoned Professor McGonagall from the side of the stage and directed her to handle the maddening crowd. He took Ron aside, as he conjured stretchers for the injured. Other teachers appeared to assist him. Harry was being lifted onto one of the stretchers when he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye, turning he saw Bernard Connolly pushing himself off the stretcher. His eyes met Harry's and he raised his wand.

"Stupefy!" Harry turned and to his surprise, saw Ron standing behind him, holding his wand poised for attack.

"Alright, Harry?" he asked quietly.

Harry nodded and turned to the stretcher next to him to meet Hermione's gaze. She was still not fully conscious, as was obvious by her eyes. Harry lay his head back, black bursts already beginning to cloud his vision.

"Please, can I stay until it's time for dinner?"

"Ms. Granger, you have not left this room in twenty four hours. If he awakens, you'll be notified, but you need your rest as well," Madam Pomfrey was instructing Hermione as Harry's eyes began to open. He blinked, trying to focus his vision and Hermione noticed almost instantly.

"Harry!" she gasped, rushing back to the side of his bed. Madam Pomfrey was right behind her, motioning her away so that she could check over Harry.

Almost as if he'd been watching, Dumbledore walked into the room and quickly made his way to Harry's bed. "Poppy, if you please, I'd like some time with Harry and Hermione. We need to discuss what happened."

Madam Pomfrey shook her head, walking away and muttering about special treatment.

"Harry, I've waited to hear the story from both you and Hermione. Mr. Malfoy is still unconscious and Poppy does not expect him to wake for another day. Minister Connolly is currently still stupefied. Whatever charm Mr. Weasley used, it was a touch more powerful than the normal stupefying spell. He'll have to be the one to remove it, which he doesn't seem to be willing to do just yet. Now, I believe Ms. Granger, it's best if you start, as you saw the spell hit Harry."

She nodded. "Well, at the presentation, I had this—"

“Go ahead,” Harry whispered, knowing why she paused.

“Well, we have this map, and you can see everything on it.”

“The Maurauder's Map,” he said simply. Hermione blushed slightly before continuing.

“Well, anyways, I was watching the map, because I had noticed that you can see my parents and Ami on it, and I was wondering if they were going to the presentations. I-well, I saw something very strange when Harry got up on stage. As Minister Connolly was asked up, I saw the little dot walking up to the stage. Only the name wasn't Minister Connolly. It was Bartemis Crouch.”

Dumbledore sniffed at this.

“Then, I saw him throw that curse at Harry. Harry fell and I had Ginny cast a charm on me that we'd studied for our Divination block. We had been practicing it, just in case something ever happened with Harry,” she blushed as she said this. Dumbledore nodded and turned to face Harry.

“Well, I don't even know what happened. I basically remember Hermione shouting at me, and then I fell. When I, well, I guess you could say, woke up, I was in Terre de la Magie and Tristram was there.”

Harry continued with his story, with Hermione occasionally adding in bits and pieces, specifically what she had encountered and seen. Dumbledore listened intently throughout the story, his hands clasping his knee as he sat next to Harry's bed.

“He used some sort of charm, it was in Mage, and it got inside of me and pulled out a charm.... It was called the Veneficus Quies. It's some sort of mind control. I tried to fight it, but the charm he used was designed to pull Veneficus out of me, and I couldn't hold onto it.” He looked down at his hands. Dumbledore was nodding and patted Harry on the shoulder.

“Sometimes, Harry it is important to remember that the battles we fight are just as important as the outcomes of those battles.”

Harry nodded. “He's got this charm now. It's some sort of Key-“ His head snapped up.

“Hermione! The journal! He had the journal! It had everything in it. The Keys and the Prophecy!”

Her eyes grew wide. “It was a Key?”

“That's what he said!”

They both turned to look at Dumbledore, who seemed to be puzzling out something in his mind. “He has two then?”

Hermione's mouth dropped. “You knew about the Keys?”

“I know very little about them. There's an ancient myth, a legend if you will, involving Four Keys. There's something special about them, I'm not sure what they unlock, or lock for that matter. I do know that they're damn near impossible to find, physically, or even in written record.”

Harry and Hermione both nodded.

“What happened after he took the Key from you, Harry?”

“They had me tied up and Voldemort instructed Lucius Malfoy to take me down, and when he was about to-“

“I called out,” Hermione said softly. She slowly explained her part in the cemetery.

Dumbledore listened in earnest, nodding occasionally.

“How did they not see you?”

“I had Harry's Invisibility Cloak.”

“Did you have it with you?”

She shook her head. “I understood it was a dream-like state and that I could basically gather anything I needed from his memory, as long as I knew the proper charm.” She

shifted uncomfortably as she said this. Dumbledore nodded his head once, urging her story onwards.

"Harry saved me. Voldemort had put Cruciatus on me and Harry, well, I don't even know what he did. But Voldemort collapsed, and I ran to Harry."

"I saw Voldemort standing up and as he threw Cruciatus at us again, I pushed Hermione out of the way. I'm not sure what happened though, and the next thing I knew, we were in some strange forest."

"Draco. Draco cast us from the dream."

Harry turned his gaze from Dumbledore to look at Hermione, who was crying.

"All those awful things I said to him, Harry! He saved us, and now he's hurt."

"Hermione, we do not yet know where Draco stands in this war. That is why I allowed him to study in IMS. It is my understanding that even under the best conditions, you never got along, but Draco leads a very different life. He has been initiated as a Death Eater, though I did not learn of it until recently."

"You let him stay here, even as a Death Eater?" Hermione gasped.

"Draco will be staying here this summer as well. We have offered him sanctuary and he needs to be protected until he figures out his role in the world."

It was obvious that Hermione was becoming very angry. "What if he does decide to stay a Death Eater? You can't very well have him roaming about the school!"

"Ms. Granger, that is a matter between Mr. Malfoy and myself."

Hermione settled back into her chair. They all sat in silence for a few moments.

"What did you mean 'as well'?" Harry asked suddenly.

"You and Hermione will both be staying here this summer," Dumbledore answered simply.

"I thought we would be going to the Burrow this summer?"

"There is something the two of you must understand. Last year, we had a parting of ways. Minister Fudge would not fight the inevitable and he lost his life because of it. This year, the danger has increased a thousand fold. Last year, I was certain that while Fudge was not on my side, most of the Ministry members were. I cannot be certain of that now. Voldemort has the power to create guises that fool even myself. He has a very faithful servant in the Minister of Magic's office and with Arthur Weasley not being at the Ministry, I feel our side has been severely handicapped."

More nods of understanding. As they resumed the pensive silence again, a loud commotion erupted outside.

"My best friends are in there!"

"Ronald Weasley, please! Now is not the time!" came Professor McGonagall's stern voice.

"Please, Professor McGonagall, just a few minutes?" Ginny's pleading voice entered the infirmary and a short minute later, the door was opening and Ron came charging in, with Professor McGonagall shouting after him.

Madam Pomfrey stepped from her office just as Ron flew by. She gave Dumbledore an angry glare before huffing back into her office and slamming the door.

"Harry! Hermione! Are you alright?" Ron asked, finally reaching Harry's bed.

"I'm fine. I feel pretty weak, but other than that, I'm alive."

Hermione smiled meekly at Harry, catching his gaze.

"I have some things I must attend to. I'll leave you both in the capable hands of Mr. and Ms. Weasley." Dumbledore nodded at them both before heading out into the hallway.

"Blimey, Harry, you had me really terrified there. The spell that Herm did was wicked though. Where did you learn it?"

Hermione shrugged. "I read about it."

"I'm sure you did." Ron grinned at them both.

The next hour passed in amicable chatter. The four students were talking and laughing as if there were no Dark, evil power casting a shadow on their very existence. Harry was happy. Hermione didn't seem eager to leave his side, and the glances she would occasionally pass him assured him that what had happened between them would not be brushed off as another 'in the moment' situation.

As Ron was describing the finer points of his OWL examination with Professor Trelawney, the entrance to the infirmary opened once more and Dumbledore entered, looking very grave and being followed closely by Professor McGonagall.

"Ginny, Ron. We need to speak with you. If you would follow Professor McGonagall into Poppy's office, I'll be right in."

Ginny gave him a strange look before pulling herself out of her chair. She followed Ron into the office, throwing Harry a glance over her shoulder.

"I wonder what's going on," Hermione said softly.

"I have no idea. I'm sure everything is fine though."

Hermione nodded and shifted her chair closer, pulling his hand towards her. He smiled at her and leaned to give her a kiss. She responded, giving him a soft kiss in return before pulling away and smiling at him.

"You all right, Mione?"

"I will be. I just need time to think everything through is all."

Harry nodded and returned her smile. "I'll always be here for you if you need me."

"I know," she whispered softly.

"So, those tests we took. What about everyone else?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" she said, looking startled at the sudden change of topic.

"You know, Ginny, she's only a fourth year. Cho is a sixth year..."

"Right, I think they grouped us the way they did for a reason. All of the fifth years were together so that we would have the same basic evaluation. I think that the others had some sort of similar exam, either to pass their regular end of the year exams, or the NEWTs." Hermione fixed him with a strange look. "Are you sure you're all right, Harry?"

Harry nodded. A click sounded from the other end of the room and Harry looked over to see Ginny and Ron walking out of Madam Pomfrey's office. He noticed, much to his dismay that Ginny was crying and Ron was wearing a very stony façade.

"Ginny?" Hermione asked, standing to meet her friend. Ginny wiped a hand across her cheek and looked at her friend. With a great sob, she flung her arms around Hermione's shoulders and began sobbing wildly onto Hermione's shoulder. Hermione looked startled, but held her friend closely, looking directly at Ron, who was staring at Harry.

"What is it?" Harry asked cautiously, pushing himself off of his bed and walking slowly towards the group.

Ron swallowed and cleared his throat. "He-he's gone," he answered slowly and without emotion, staring at Harry stoically.

Harry shifted under his duvet, trying to get a more comfortable position. Madam Pomfrey had let him go back to his room shortly after Dumbledore had delivered the news of Arthur Weasley's death. Ginny had fled from the room shortly after Ron had told he and Hermione. Hermione looked torn between going after her friend and staying to help Harry.

"Go after her. She needs someone," Harry had said.

Hermione had apparated after Ginny, leaving a very controlled Ron and a very upset Harry.

Ron had helped Harry back to his room and get settled in.

“Ron?”

“No, Harry,” Ron had responded before asking one last time if Harry needed anything. Upon receiving a negative response, he had left without saying more than a simple goodbye.

Harry leaned back against the pillows, trying to halt the emotion coursing through him. He had nearly succeeded when Hermione came into his room. She walked to the bed and crawled in next to him. One look at her overflowing eyes and the floodgates inside of him opened.

The pain came in great, heaving gasps that tore from his lungs. He had never experienced such raw feelings of loss, anger, and sadness. Arthur Weasley had been the closest thing to a father that Harry had had, even after he’d met Sirius. Sirius couldn’t be there for him all the time, but Arthur had done his best to help Harry out or to keep him informed.

Hermione sobbed with him, holding onto him as if she was afraid to let go. The overwhelming emotions from the past forty eight hours smashed Harry all at once and he cried freely, mentally welcoming the release.

“Arthur Weasley was a man who was given the most difficult choice a man could be offered. He was given the option of an immediate death or life, but under the rule of a dark and sinister hand. He fought against the life of slavery on the day that the Ministry was attacked and he fought against that life everyday he worked at the Ministry, trying to improve it from within, and trying to keep the Dark forces out.”

“His choice to fight ultimately cost him his life, but it was not a life that will easily be forgotten. The life of Arthur Weasley lives on in his wife Molly, and his seven children. In the memories of friends, and in the daily lives of co-workers, Arthur Weasley lives on.”

“We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road -- the one less traveled by -- offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.”

“Arthur Weasley would stand here and tell us to take the road less travelled by, regardless of the difficulties we may encounter. In the near future, we will experience a world the likes of which we have never seen. We will all have to make choices, many of them very difficult, but that does not make them any less necessary. In memory of Arthur, and in memory of those who have gone before him, we must make the right choice. It is always the right choice or death, for in the eyes of the good, there is no other choice.”

Dumbledore stood on the edge of the lake at Hogwarts, facing a large crowd that had gathered for this day. Harry found it hard to believe that they had only learned of Arthur’s death two days prior. It seemed both like an eternity and as only a moment before. He wiped at his eyes, feeling the tears begin to gather again.

It was a brilliantly sunny day, with a cool breeze gently drifting through the crowd. Harry had never been to a wizard’s funeral before, but he found that it did not differ greatly from a muggle funeral. The only main difference being that wizard tradition

called for the cremation of the body. Arthur's ashes were being spread into the lake at Hogwarts, as was always his wish.

He watched on silently as the Weasley clan moved next to Dumbledore. Charlie was practically holding his mother upright, while Bill had his arm looped protectively around Ginny. Ron and Percy stood together, both wearing stoic looks void of emotion. It was Fred and George, however, that was most unnerving. The two boys, usually happy-go-lucky and carefree wore matching solemn expressions that would haunt Harry for many months.

Dumbledore handed the urn to Bill, and as the family moved towards the edge of the lake, the crowd began to disperse, giving them privacy.

Harry and Hermione made their way back to the dorm in complete silence. In the living room, they separated and each headed to their respective bedrooms. Harry walked into his room, not seeing his bed or any of his things. He was void of emotion or thought, and automatically, he dropped to the bed, unclasping his dress robes as he sat.

After several moments, the sounds of someone rummaging around met his ears and he rose, following the noises. He was led to Hermione's door, which was open. He leaned against the frame as he looked in.

Hermione was moving quickly about, dashing to and fro, throwing things into her open trunk. She picked up some things by hand, while simultaneously waving her wand at other objects. He watched her for a moment, his eyebrow cocked, before he cleared his throat.

She noticed him for the first time and looked up, barely registering his presense before returning to her packing. He waved his hand and held her in place, causing a bunch of robes to fall into a heap on the floor. She looked at him, eyes blazing.

"What are you doing?" he asked calmly.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" she said, a touch of acid in her voice.

He raised his eyebrows at her, slightly taken aback.

"Oh, Harry, I'm sorry. Can you let me go now, please?"

He waved his hand so that she could resume her crazed packing, but he did not move from the door.

"So, Hermione, what *are* you doing?"

"I'm packing."

"I see that. For what? We're staying here this summer."

"I'm not. I'm going to the Burrow."

"You're what?"

"I'm going to the Burrow, Harry. I can help out Molly. And besides Ginny needs me. Ron needs me."

"Ron needs you?"

"Yes, Harry. What ever happened between us isn't important right now. When worse comes to worst, he's still one of my best friends."

"But, Hermione, I need you. Dumbledore says I need to spend this summer regaining my strength."

"Oh, Harry, you don't need me for that."

"But what about us Hermione?"

"*What* about us, Harry? There is no us."

He felt as if Hermione had just torn his heart from his body and stomped on it, right in front of him. He gaped at her, the hurt written all over his face.

She gasped suddenly and dropped a stack of textbooks she was holding.

"Oh, Harry... I didn't mean it like that."

“How did you mean it then?”

She dropped onto her own bed and cradled her head in her arms. He stood staring at her, the gaze on his face unchanging and unmoving.

Finally she looked up at him.

“Damn it, Harry. His dad *died*. He needs me there, to be his friend. It’s nothing more than that. Harry, if you want this to work, whatever this is between us, you have to trust me.”

“Hermione, it’s not that I don’t trust you. I guess I just don’t understand. It’s like sometimes, you want me, and other times, you don’t. I don’t know what to think anymore.” He sighed and moved to sink next to her on the bed.

She leaned against him.

“Do you understand why I have to go?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes, of course.”

“No, I don’t. Hermione, does Ron even want you there? Won’t it be awkward? And I don’t understand why you can’t stay here to be with me, I need you too.”

“Harry. Don’t try to change my mind, I’m going.”

He stood up, his anger boiling up inside of them.

“Fine,” he hissed, storming out of her room and slamming the door.

He was brooding in his room when someone rapped sharply on the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me. Please, can I come in?” Hermione asked quietly from the opposite side of the door.

He walked towards the door and unlocked it, tugging it open and walking back to his bed, all without meeting Hermione’s eyes.

“What is it?”

“I just wanted to say goodbye.”

“Bye.”

“Harry,” she said softly, walking towards the bed.

“What is it Hermione?”

“Please don’t be like this. I have to go. Please, Harry,” she pleaded, her eyes never wavering from his.

Her eyes told him that nothing had changed between them, that she still wanted him, even when she was leaving to go to Ron’s. He sighed, melting into her gaze. Resigned, he pulled her to him in a tight hug.

“Will you write me?” he asked.

“Everyday. It’ll be ok, Harry. It’ll go fast. You’ll be able to regain your lost strength and by the time I come back, your magic will be fully recovered.”

His laugh was hollow. “It’ll be boring without you, you know.”

“No, it won’t. I have a surprise for you.” She grinned devilishly at him and stood up, walking back towards the living room.

His curiosity got the best of him and he followed her out.

The small bark caused an immediate smile. Hermione was bending over a small carrier, undoing the lock. As soon as she opened the door, Daryl bounded out and towards Harry.

He bent to pick up his dog, admittedly having missed her terribly. She jumped all over him, licking his face. He laughed and wasn’t surprised by a small shout emitting from a box.

“Harry Potter!” came a very familiar voice as the lid of the box toppled off. Chief Pip jumped from the box, looking exactly the same. “Harry Potter sir, good to see you. Miss, where’s the cat?”

Hermione laughed and pointed to Crookshank’s basket.

“How did you get them here Hermione?”

She shrugged. “Mysterious girl powers,” she grinned at him.

“Must be,” he smiled at her before quickly closing the gap in between them. Pulling her close, their noses touching, he whispered, “I’m going to miss you terribly.”

“I’m going to miss you too.” She kissed him, passionately, yearning and with a deep sense of urgency.

He groaned against her lips as her hands roamed his back and his arms and as they wove through his hair.

“I’ll miss you, Harry, I really will.”

He hugged her tightly and she stepped back, gathering her things close to her. With a wave of her wand, nearly everything disappeared. And in a flash, it was all gone.

Thanks to everyone who has reviewed the story. Also, thanks to Elliott my beta reader and to Neil and Mae, who kept pushing me and helping me out with parts I was stuck at. The quote Dumbledore uses is from Rachel Carlson. Look for Harry Potter and the Wand of Ariel, coming soon.